THE MERRY HEART

THE MERRY HEART

BY FRANK SWINNERTON

THE MERRY HEART
A BROOD OF DUCKLINGS
THE CASEMENT
SUMMER STORM
THE ELDER SISTER
YOUNG FELIX
THE THREE LOVERS
COQUETTE
SEPTEMBER
SHOPS AND HOUSES
NOCTURNE
THE CHASTE WIFE
ON THE STAIRCASE
THE HAPPY FAMILY
THE YOUNG IDEA
THE MERRY HEART

GEORGE GISSING:
A CRITICAL STUDY

R. L. STEVENSON:
A CRITICAL STUDY

A LONDON BOOKMAN
TOKEFIELD PAPERS

THE MERRY HEART

A GENTLE MELODRAMA

BY FRANK SWINNERTON

JOG ON, JOG ON, THE FOOT-PATH WAY
AND MERRILY HENT THE STILE-A:
A MERRY HEART GOES ALL THE DAY,
YOUR SAD TIRES IN A MILE-A.

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.
1929

282173

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

FIRST EDITION

TO

THE O. M.

FROM A YOUNGER

CONTEMPORARY

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THE MERRY HEART

CHAPTER I

THE LOCKERY FAMILY

EVERY morning when Locritus junior awoke he looked up at the dim gray ceiling of his bedroom with a certain awe and horror. It constantly surprised him afresh that he should be so incapable of turning to account the early hours of the morning. Being possessed of some literary yearnings, Locritus had once resolved—it was on his twentieth birthday—that he would use the interval between five-thirty and seven-thirty for study and thus achieve a certain measure of greatness by the persistent absorption of knowledge. On the morning following his decision Locritus slept until ten minutes past eight and greatly resented his sister's repeated applications. Later, he saw the folly not only of his totally inadequate resentment but of his hasty resolve. Time sped, and at the end of his twenty-third year Locritus rose smilingly at seven-thirty, flung a gay, good-humoured, approving, affectionate glance at his books, bathed, shaved, sang, and gesticulated without a crackle of conscience within his breast.

"Application," he said one morning, "means money. I am a dilettante (something far nobler than an applicant). I cannot, that is to say, I care not for pelf."

He tried in his characteristically, half-slumbrous state to contrive a rhyme with "wealth"; but with a striking perception of his own fatuity, Locritus desisted and surveyed once more the gray depths of the ceiling.

"I wonder if I could whitewash that waste?" he muttered. "*All* right!"

Repeated tintinnabulations from the hall below, where his impatient Fanny bestirred herself to interrupt his slumbers.

"One would think," ruminated Locritus mournfully, "that life was composed of breakfast, so obstinate and persistent is my adorable sister."

He thrust a lean arm in the air and yawned—a bewildering succession of yawns.

"What a sight!" ejaculated Locritus, surveying the arm.

Tat-tat-tat!

"Charley, it's five-and-twenty to——" came in warning and agitated tones from without.

"I'm up!" lied Locritus. "Shaving in cold."

"Let me see," suggested Fanny.

"Immodest and insulting girl!" Locritus blustered.

"I don't believe you. Oh, Charley, *do* get up; Father's getting so wild."

"Wild! Worse than insulting—*unladylike!*" said Locritus.

Descending steps showed that his condemnation of the word had been unavailing. He slowly extricated himself from the embrace of his blanket, and untied the sheet from its position about his neck. Ten minutes later,

unshaven but triumphant, Locritus was bowing his way into the breakfast room.

"And where," he demanded with a superb innocence, "is this breakfast about which there is so much to-do?"

Locritus senior hung morosely over his paper, giving not so much as an oblique glance to his son. Fanny shot a sombre reproof at Charles. He sat down, repressed but by no means abashed. The breakfast proceeded in detail, without speech, excepting that Fanny asked in a whisper for the salt.

The junior Locritus, casting about for some distraction, took up a volume of theological writings dealing with the miracles of our Lord and comprising several rancorous attacks upon the amiable Renan and the more positive Strauss. He closed the book slowly after a wry sampling of its contents.

"This yours, Dad?"

A silence during which Fanny peeped apprehensively from one to the other, knowing the grimness of her father and the spirit of Charles.

"This book," said Locritus.

"Eh—what? Oh, yes, nonsense."

The parent returned to his paper: affairs in Portugal preoccupied his attention. He gave passing consideration to the meal.

"Will you be home early?" asked Fanny, low.

Locritus junior was in a dream, watching his father's head, of which he could see the top only as it rose above the newspaper. He noticed no thinning of the hair, but was aware that a slight touch of white began to show

now and then among the black. Locritus senior had always been a fascinating subject of study to his son, whose views upon human nature took their rise from a constant and unrevealed observation of his parents.

"Yes," said Charles, "I want to *work,* you know," he went on threateningly.

Fanny's face became grave.

"Oh," she said, "I wanted you to take me out."

Locritus stared at her in pretended surprise.

"What! Go out with one's sister! Unprecedented. Not *de rigueur.* People don't do these things."

"Don't be so silly. Will you?"

It gave Charles a certain amount of pleasure to walk with his sister; her remarks upon the fragments of life presenting themselves along her path were always full of freshness, and he appreciated to the utmost Fanny's reliance upon him, upon his opinion, his integrity, his strength. Now Locritus knew very well that—apart from its forcefulness—his opinion was worth the hum of a fly; he doubted the complete honesty of his intentions at all times, being morbidly disposed to self-examination; and he was quite confident that his strength was inconsiderable, although he knew when to laugh and thus cover his defeat. Nevertheless he was in no way capable of turning Fanny's mind from its high estimate, and he had assured himself upon similar occasions that it was, after all, well for one person to find in him the sum-total of human perfection.

"She might do worse," he had said. "And she'll learn fast enough."

Therefore he eyed his sister loweringly.

"Why should I suffer for your whim?" he demanded, but in an exaggerated gloom, so that she might not be hurt.

"I can't go alone," Fanny urged coaxingly.

"There's the garden."

"It's such a little thing to do."

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Where d'you want to go?"

Fanny hedged, but he knew her and flew plummet-like upon the depths of her desire.

"You want to look in those filthy gardens at the green stuff."

"I promised Mother," Fanny admitted. "She wants to know the name of that pretty flower she saw: she hadn't her glasses."

Locritus groaned, in spirit as well as in form.

"That grinning crowd—trailing round. . . . All right; I suppose I've got to suffer."

"Poor martyr!" Fanny said. "It isn't fair, I know."

Charles pushed his chair back. His sister was sentimental, and he loathed kind words.

"I shall miss that train," he said, snatching a last sip of tea. "Home at half-past six. G'-bye, Father."

For five minutes the room was quiet, silence being broken only faintly by Fanny's mute inquiry into the contents of the teapot.

"More, Father?" she asked in a moment.

No answer. Then, still gently, but a little louder:

"More tea, Father?"

"Eh? Ah, yes."

A curious scraping, rustling sound came like breakers in the distance, like mice in a pantry: a tall, portly form, still handsome, appeared at the door.

"Morning, Mother," said Fanny.

"Good-morning," said Mrs. Lockery inclusively. Her husband nodded at her.

"Charley gone?" asked the mother, as though she were tired.

Fanny nodded and turned to the stove.

"We're going to the gardens to-night," she said.

"Gardens—what gardens? Oh—that flower."

Mr. Lockery frowned: Fanny felt his irritation. She realized that her father was not in a good humour, and that her mother's frame of mind was of a nature to provoke disagreement. It was with foreboding that she produced the refilled teapot.

A paper connected with some political agitation had come by post for Mrs. Lockery, who opened it and read by the aid of her glasses.

"Thank you," she said, as though her mind were elsewhere. Fanny looked down at her own hands against the chair she held: compared with those of her mother they seemed red and coarse. She became aware of her father's gaze, a terrible comprehending look, of which she was instinctively afraid because she felt how little availing was her quick change of pose and occupation. In a minute Fanny went to the scullery: from the door she could see beyond a field to the fresh, fine country, stretching for many miles in beautiful irregular divi-

sions, bordered and dissected by dark trees and hedges now sprinkled at intervals with rich blossoms. Cows were feeding in the meadows, and somewhere near she could hear the tinkling bell of a dog that presently barked in ecstasy at a discovered stone. Hampton had the open country on the north, and its pleasant stretches were unequalled elsewhere in Hertfordshire; but on the other hand the town, growing beyond all recognition, spread in aching redness from the gray boundaries of its original constitution to an imperfectly discoverable greenness beyond the railway. It was on the happier prospect that the back windows of the Lockery household faced: many times had Fanny breathed an ejaculation of thankfulness when she realized that the builders' hands might not be laid upon her loved pastures. Truly, it was an imperfect happiness to observe the meadows from home, and that was her nearest approach until the evening, for Fanny was well occupied throughout the day with her housework. In the evening, however, if Charley were kind, and did not want to work, or to walk alone, she sometimes found him willing to escort her on rambles all too short. Of friends she had none, for Mr. Lockery, frequently absent, invited no local visitors by his manner; while her mother was too completely immersed in her political propaganda and the grievances of other distant persons to give much thought to contented neighbours or the heart searchings of her daughter.

Fanny stood for a few moments only, considering the view; and then she found her father waiting at her side, an unaccustomed expression in his eyes.

"Aren't you happy, Fanny?" he asked abruptly. "Tell me."

Fanny faltered. She did not feel miserable, she told herself; she was happy—happy. Yet there was something like a sob in her throat as instinctively she turned away from him.

"Oh," she said, "I only wish—sometimes."

"What do you wish?" asked her father quietly.

"I don't know, quite!" Fanny made honest answer. "Only something different—something exciting."

"But you mustn't cry."

"I don't—I'm not," Fanny protested. "I can't tell you—it's so silly of me, but your speaking—it's made me quite absurd. Really, I don't cry about it."

Mr. Lockery looked at her closely: an observer might have thought he understood less than Fanny imagined. The expression in his eyes had behind it some curious wonderment, as though he newly realized, and only half grasped, an elementary trait in his little daughter's character.

"Do you want your difference so soon?" he asked. "Can't you wait?"

"Nothing ever happens—to me. It's the same *always*."

There was no petulance in Fanny's voice: only a far more saddening depression. Her father patted her shoulder and said nothing more, but presently moved away slowly and irresolutely.

From the kitchen Mrs. Lockery turned to invade the study, in which were her husband's many books and

his writing desk. At the latter she seated herself and wrote voluminously every morning. What she wrote her family could never understand, for the children had no opportunity of discovering, and her husband appeared to feel no curiosity. On this morning, when he entered the room with his theological book, he went right past her and stood for a moment looking out into the garden beyond the front window. Presently he turned.

"I'm going north to-morrow, Helen," he announced.

"I wondered how long it would last," Mrs. Lockery answered, hostility in her voice.

Her husband winced, either at some truth hidden in her bitter retort, or at the rough tone in which it was delivered.

"Before you go you'll leave some money," said Mrs. Lockery.

"Yes. By the way, what became of the money for Fanny's dresses?"

He spoke slowly, quietly, deliberately, and he did not look at his wife.

"What do you mean?" she demanded recklessly—"what do you mean?" Mrs. Lockery rose at the table and held the edge of it with her right hand.

"I left you fifteen pounds for new clothes, and she has worn nothing new all the time I've been here. She spends her time (what she is spared from her work) in renewing old things. I didn't intend that the money should be used—even temporarily—for propagandist purposes."

The fury that raged in Mrs. Lockery's breast showed

only in a slightly increased colour. She looked steadily at her husband's side-face and then at the table again.

"You're very insulting," she cried at last—"very."

"Yes, but what about the money?" her husband asked drily. "The amount is nothing: the purpose for which it was intended is the difficulty."

"If you talk to me like that I shan't answer you," cried Mrs. Lockery, gradually losing her temper. She forsook the position she held at the table and moved to the other side of the room, beside the mantelpiece.

"I only want an answer to one question," said the quiet voice.

Mrs. Lockery was in the wrong: her soul revolted from the offensively mild tone of her husband's opening remark, but the truth of his suspicion was the key to her fury. She would not explain, as indeed she could not justify, her action in depriving Fanny of her fifteen pounds in order to make good a deficiency in the funds of her organization. She would have guaranteed the return of the money from the allowance her husband next made if it had not been that his manner, his voice, and his very attitude were all offensive to her. Stung by the justness of her own regret and the impotence of her gathering anger into a still more impotent arrogance and rage, she allowed the pent-up grievances of years to force themselves through her reserve.

"You are calling me a thief: I'm no such thing!" she said, trying in vain to control her voice. "You leave me to myself for months on end; I have to interest myself; I can't do as many fools of women would do—

interest myself in the business of a household. You blame me for letting Fanny work, but you let Charley work and say nothing; you allow me little enough for house and food; you let your children think of themselves as belonging to a poverty-stricken family. You keep me tethered in this hole of a place, alone, surrounded on all sides by people of no education, no brain —all for some whim. You say nothing of your life away from us; you do nothing—never have done anything. You lead one to suppose you wealthy, and you allow your boy to earn his living as a clerk, alone and unaided! Then you think to justify yourself by complaining of me as though I had embezzled money belonging to Fanny. Why, it's monstrous! How do I know whether *you* are honest? What proof have I that you don't lead a separate life altogether, that you couldn't help our children to an easier life, to a hopeful existence——"

Her breath failed in a sudden sob, and she became afraid.

"We've discussed this before," said her husband gravely, although his face was the colour of ashes. "You are simply less dignified than usual. Whatever my life may be, or may have been when away, I have never, never been untrue to you or to the children. You're simply talking hysterical nonsense. And you don't explain the fifteen pounds."

Mrs. Lockery stood silent, breathing rapidly.

"Supposing I give you another fifteen pounds, can I rely upon your using it for Fanny, or must I try and

find some other means of giving her what she needs?"

"Give it to me," came in a whisper. "I'll promise."

Mrs. Lockery was looking old and weary, although she was not more than forty-five. Still handsome in repose, but much less so than in her early womanhood, she looked at this moment like a pale replica of herself: worn and trembling, her face robbed of its overfull colour, she stood, bowed and forlorn. Her husband crossed the room and stood beside her.

"Don't touch me, don't touch me!" she cried. "I couldn't bear it."

"Oh, come now——" objected Mr. Lockery, almost with a smile.

"It's true!" his wife whispered passionately. "I couldn't bear it."

Fanny appeared at the door.

"You're so long," she said, "and sounded so angry."

"On the contrary," said her father, standing between his daughter and his wife, "we have been talking about you. And in that case nobody could be angry, could they?"

CHAPTER II

MALLOWS

It was Charles Lockery's custom to travel each morning with a friend, who awaited him on the platform. Dickers—Thomas Dickers—was of the same age as Locritus, and gifted with a solemnity which had secured him a responsible post in a large insurance company. The mystery of his retention of that position was profound, for Dickers had no great ability; no ingenious original flow of ideas; he was devoid of personal attractiveness, except it be the radiation of his patent honesty, and his manners showed the crudest ideas of deportment. Locritus found him an intense study, a very monument of respectability, a colossus of opposition; they wrangled upon every conceivable subject with a pertinacity which sometimes astonished even Locritus. The fertility of his own mind gave him ample superiority over the mind of Dickers, but it was insufficient to cope with the dead weight which Dickers cast upon a subject. Had he an idea, Dickers was majestic in his unanswerable triumph; if ideas failed, he took refuge in stubbornness. A great solid brown face, with expressionless eyes and a serious mouth that betrayed his natural obstinacy, gave no indication of his kind heart, his unfailing readiness to forgive Locritus all his sins of rudeness and sharp practice in argument. It was his

attachment to what was best in the character of Locritus that made him a loyal friend and produced a hearty, if somewhat facetious, regard in return. For Locritus was secretly very fond of Dickers: he liked to see the brown face redden with a growing rage, to see the obvious chagrin of a defeated opponent; or to feel that here was a victor who was at least merciful. In the cases in which Dickers discomfited his chum facts were in question; for theories he had no head at all. He could remember statistics, whole speeches on the subject of political economy, and sometimes the very words in which they were uttered; but if he were asked to define his position he became rose-coloured and spent the remainder of the railway journey battling with interjections from Locritus.

"Mornin'," said Dickers, near the ticket collector's gate, as the train steamed in and Locritus jumped the last five steps.

"Beastly!" observed Locritus.

"You know," Dickers went on, as he lowered the window of their carriage, "you oughtn't to have to run. I was up at six all right."

"But, my old pal Dickers!" exclaimed Locritus, "what's that got to do with me?"

"What I can do——" commenced Dickers slowly.

"You're a marvel," Locritus assured him, and lay back with one leg along the carriage seat. They spoke of other matters and then were silent for a time. The train ran between level green banks upon which stunted bushes grew sadly.

"I say," Dickers began in a minute, and he was fiery red under his friend's inquiring glance.

"Well?" Locritus asked after a pause, during which Dickers hung on to the window strap.

"You're such a beast—a cynical beast." (Locritus suffered in silence.) "Do you think Fanny—I mean, do you know——"

Locritus crowed and kicked up his legs in the air.

"Did he, the little sentimentalist!" said Locritus pleasantly.

"Shut up—you've no right to make fun of your sister," Dickers cried, his whole body agitated with the strength of his feelings.

The train slowed down at the next station, a small tributary, as it were, to the main stream. A solitary man made his entry. Dickers glowered at him with a ferocity increased by the innocent face opposite. Dickers could have murdered the intruder and struck Locritus, so strongly were his feelings aroused.

Locritus whistled softly to himself, sickening songs that made the blood of Dickers boil. He raised a large fist and examined it thoughtfully.

"Mallows is in Hampton," Dickers vouchsafed shortly, to relieve the tension.

"In Hampton?"

"Yes."

"What's he want?"

"Stayin' a fortnight—aunt or something."

"Drivel."

"Well—that's what he told me."

Locritus wondered what on earth Mallows could be after: he knew him so well, with his smiling eye and the loose mouth under the smart moustache. Of all places Hampton . . .

"He's on the make," Locritus suggested.

"Asked me about Jimmy Fitton's electrical things."

What did Mallows want with Fitton? Why was he there at all? Locritus knew nothing definite of Mallows's ill-doings; he only knew his disposition, with its keen eye to the main chance, its tendency to cruelty if thwarted. He had many times seen Mallows kick a passing dog with enjoyment of its yelp, had seen him do the little things that stamp a mind tainted and mean. As far as Locritus hated anything he hated Mallows, not from uncertainty of his next action, but from conviction that it would be disreputable.

He was so busy thinking about Mallows, and then about Dickers and Fanny, and laughing at the solemn Tom Dickers, and imagining Fanny's sensations on discovering a lover in such a man when her ideas soared so, that even the terminus found him still busy. Dickers dragged his sleeve.

"Shall I see you to-night?" he asked.

"No," Locritus told him; "I'm going out with Fan."

The look in reply cut him to the heart, but he punched his friend gaily in the waistcoat and departed.

It was a curious glass room in which Locritus worked, a room within a room, like three others which joined on to his. In the farthest the two girl typists; nearer, a man,

who was out nearly all day and had to get along beside the tapping machines as best he could; next, the younger son of the proprietor, who glanced sharply at the things one had on one's desk or in one's hand; and, finally, the smallest office held the desk and the person of Charles Lockery. Partitioned offices were in all the other large rooms, excepting in the case of those used by Mr. Lidstone and Mr. Grey, the one the proprietor, the other the general manager. The elder of Mr. Lidstone's sons, a gay young man, had a desk in his father's office, which he occupied only when and while his father was present. He was a pleasant fellow enough, Locritus thought, barring a tendency toward philandering—and, anyway, he found life easy. That was more than Locritus could say honestly for himself, in spite of his glorious nonsense. Of course, one had to put a good face on things; it was an intrenchment behind which one could retire in moments of sentimentality, as when one's sister invited pity, or in face of consideration. After all, Locritus argued, it did no harm to chaff people, so long as they stood it all right; and it came in very handy in moments of defeat.

"My philosophy," he told Miss Marsden, one day, "is that it's no good making a fuss—not Tolstoyan, you know, but nothing militant."

Miss Marsden, invariably kind, suggested from her natural prejudice that his philosophy—so fine a name for so small a possession—originated in laziness alone.

"It is simply that you don't take the trouble," she told him. "What you think is philosophy is pure indiffer-

ence. Satirical people usually are indifferent." It was well to be oracular, she thought, in quelling self-esteem.

When Locritus had been a moment at his desk Miss Marsden came past, being a little late. She nodded good-morning to him in his glass cage. Locritus remembered her remark in the instant following, and debated the matter with himself.

"Why can't these filthy people order properly!" he exclaimed, swearing lightly at the words "price as before." "Why should we forever be looking up their rates? Or why don't we charge everything at a uniform rate?"

He was still fumbling at a drawer in his desk when Miss Marsden came and stood in the doorway.

"Well," asked Locritus, looking upon her as a merely additional cause of irritation.

"I'm sorry if you're busy," the girl said, backing out of the office, embarrassed by his tone and the glance he cast.

"No, no," called Locritus—"come on!"

He succeeded in opening the drawer as he spoke, and fell to congratulating himself.

"It's this," said Miss Marsden, returning quickly. "Mr. Albert gave me this last night, and told me—I don't know what he meant—to show him the particulars to-day, first thing. Then he rushed off before I read it. I've never heard of the people."

Locritus groaned and scratched his head. When he saw the letter his expression changed again to one of ferocity.

"Thunder and lightning!" said he. "How did Albert get hold of this? Look, he's had it two days. I've been waiting for it. It's none of his business. This is a thing *I'm* looking after."

Margaret waited for a moment.

"He *has* an inquiring spirit, you know," she suggested.

Locritus flung the letter down.

"How *is* a chap to get through?" he asked blankly. "I never see anything or hear anything: he goes poking round and reading things he don't understand. Why, he's like a jackdaw. Once let a thing get inside that nest of his, it's gone forever!"

"It *is* hard," Margaret agreed, speaking with difficulty.

"Well, leave it to me. No use your bothering any longer. I'll talk to him. Did *you* go to the theatre last night?"

"Wasn't I late this morning?"

"Is that so unusual?"

"I did go, but it wasn't very nice."

Locritus did not look at her as he asked the reason of her disappointment. He kept his eyes fixed upon his hands, which lay on the desk before him.

"I went with a cousin of mine—whom I don't like very much; and the play seemed—well, it seemed stupid and rather vulgar. It's not a very nice sort of play, do you think?"

"Don't know," Locritus said; "I never go to old Sellick's plays—on principle."

"I think you know my cousin: his name's Herbert Mallows," commenced Margaret. "What do *you* think of him?"

"My child," Locritus said, although he started suddenly, "'tis not for me—— By the way, I hear Albert. Disappear."

So Miss Margaret Marsden returned to her typewriting machine and to her friend with the other typewriting machine. Miss Dilkes was a superior but ill-mannered being who wore gorgeous costumes, talked of nothing but men, and in conversation called herself a stenographer. And when Albert came quietly in at the door he found Locritus ready to engage his attention.

When, later in the day, Mr. Albert disappeared into his father's room, Locritus proceeded steadily with his work, until Mr. Frederick, the elder son, lounged in, pallid and tired with late nights.

"Hello, Lockery," said he, in the careless, bored way he loved.

"Good-morning, Mr. Frederick."

"Guv'nor in yet?"

Locritus nodded with an air of meaning.

"Some time," he said. "About three quarters of an hour."

"Hm! Another row. I s'pose that damn young sneak Bert's in with him."

Locritus looked up and grinned: the cool tone of this brotherly comment pleased him.

"Your brother is there."

Fred Lidstone grinned too at that.

"*You're* a facetious young devil," he remarked casually and sauntered down to the end office.

"Mornin', ladies," he said, hat on back of his head.

Locritus listened. There came a delighted "Oh, good-morning, Mr. Frederick," from the resplendent Miss Dilkes and a perfunctory "Morning" from Margaret. He owned a wicked pleasure in the rebuff from Miss Marsden. Mr. Frederick spent some time in innocent badinage with the resplendent typist and presently returned, to meet his brother at the door of their father's room. Mr. Frederick's lip twisted in a faint sneer at one more energetic than himself.

"Hell, Bertie," he said, and passed in.

Locritus always felt that Fred, pseudo-man-of-the-world though he was, had at least the merit of honesty. He could not feel the same of Albert. Truly, Albert was a little difficult to endure: his incapability was so obvious and his manner so offensive. There was no knowing what he would do next or what use he made of his filial opportunities for the discussion of staff imperfections. But Albert worked late and kept an eye on the department in which his office was; and Fred troubled not at all about the business except as a natural source of wealth and consequently of his ex-official pleasure.

"Not a bad chap," said the men in the office. Locritus had never heard an opinion from the girls; it never occurred to him to ask, for where people were not vociferous of their views Locritus found it best, and easiest, to assume that they coincided with his own.

"Arguments are all rot," said Locritus. "Except with

Tom Dickers," he added after a pause. His small office heard many of his opinions, uttered in a hoarse, ruminant whisper.

The day came to an end slowly, like a wounded snake crawling through the grass—at least, so Dickers always said, who was deficient in imagination. Charles Lockery put aside his papers with a sigh, half of relief, half of impatience, that things were so little clearer. Albert had gone; the traveller who spent odd hours at the office had turned out his light and adjourned to Fleet Street and tea. Miss Dilkes rustled by, all charming in her frock and picture hat, pleased at her release and prospective return to the society of super-well-bred people; and Locritus came out of his office as Miss Marsden was putting on her gloves at the door of the typewriting room.

"You didn't say what you thought of my cousin," she told him.

"Is it usual for girls to ask other men about their male relatives?" Locritus asked. He knew it was rude, although gently uttered, and he knew it would hurt Margaret as it hurt him.

"Oh, all right," she said, tremulous in tone and obviously flushed. "I didn't think you'd look at it like that."

"I beg pardon," Locritus cried, penitent. "It was only because I didn't know what to say."

"I had told you what I thought," Margaret answered shortly.

"I don't know by what standard you judge your

cousin," Locritus urged. "I don't very much like him myself, but that's for reasons you might not understand. I thought there was nothing wrong with his *manner.*"

"Why you should think I judge by that—— Oh, never mind! I wanted you to help me."

"Nobody can do that," came to her along the passage.

"I *do* respect your opinion," she answered steadily; but she was glad when he said good-night and led the way to the front door.

Even in his kindest moods Fanny found her brother a little irritating; because he would persist in laughing at her very gently, as though she were too young to understand anything except in the most childish way.

"I'm not really an idiot, Charley," she said this evening, as they walked to the flower garden and took the name of that plant about which Mrs. Lockery had expressed a curiosity.

"Nobody ever suggested anything so absurd," Charley replied. "All I say is that you're——"

Fanny put her hand over his mouth in the public street. She knew what he said she was, what he called the books she liked, what he called her pleasures and her interests, and she *hated* the word unsophisticated, hated it with all her might.

"It makes me feel angry in my heart," she told him, "when you say that. Why is it that you *always* tease people, Charley?"

"In self-defence, my child," he replied, with an utter disregard of truth, "in case they should otherwise ask me to do something for them. It saves pain in the end."

As they turned out of the gardens Locritus saw a well-known figure. But Dickers was in attendance upon his mother and her sister. Locritus whistled the first two or three bars of Handel's "Droop Not, Young Lover!" and watched his friend's threatening fist. Then another figure caught his eye, walking in the road and coming forward with long strides, the man evidently being bent upon speaking to him.

"Damn!" he said vigorously, but not so low that his sister did not hear him.

"Oh, Charley! What?" asked Fanny.

"It's that chap Mallows," said Locritus.

CHAPTER III

FRESH CURRENTS

"I THOUGHT I couldn't be mistaken," said Locritus to Mallows; "there was something in the walk." He thought his tone noncommittal.

"Oh, I knew you," Mallows informed him, looking at Fanny in the way in which he generally looked at girls.

"My sister," Locritus muttered, angry at the new acquaintance.

"How d'you do?" Mallows raised his hat.

"Do you live here?" Locritus asked him.

Mallows turned abruptly.

"Oh, no," he laughed, hand to moustache. "I'm down here. Pretty place."

"One side of it," Fanny interpolated frankly, while Locritus was nodding.

"Business," Mallows went on, turning once more. There was a pause here, and Mallows shifted his walking stick from one hand to the other. "Fact is, I'm on the make, Charley."

"Oh, honest!" exclaimed his critic.

"It's about that I wanted to talk to you, old man."

"Me? Talk to me on business?"

"Yes; I want a chat. Look here, will you be in town to-morrow evening?"

"Ye-es." Locritus would have given anything to remember a prior engagement. "I shall be in town."

"Late? Could you meet me at nine o'clock—or half-past?"

"Is it important? Oh, well, all right." It was grumpily given.

"Shall we say nine-thirty in Leicester Square, outside the Alhambra? Very important: it's not wasting your time. There's something to make."

"I never doubted that," Locritus observed drily.

"Well, goo'-bye, old man—goo'-bye, Miss Lockery. Nine-thirty."

He was gone, and Fanny looked after him.

"Lord, Lord, what can he want?" groaned Locritus. "Well, thank heaven he didn't stay hanging round. That's one thing."

"Why don't you like him?" asked Fanny.

Her brother was silent for a moment.

"He's such an offensive person," Locritus told her.

"What *can* you mean, Charley?" she asked, eyeing him with a curious air of wonderment. "I thought him very nice," she added.

"Oh, woman!" exclaimed her brother sadly. "Yes, they generally do, I believe."

By a mischance due to an unfortunate disability Locritus missed his usual train on the following morning, and Dickers, who waited until the engine's wheels were revolving for the first time, made the journey alone. His friend thus arrived at the office twenty minutes late

and found Mr. Albert in his little room, looking at some papers.

"I thought you weren't coming, Lockery," he said with a sneer. What pale eyes the fellow had, and what a tremendous, weak mouth!

"I sometimes miss my train," Locritus returned smoothly, a sneer in his own voice. "I'm twenty minutes late."

Fortunately the firm's foreign correspondent had too great a value to be offended. Mr. Albert retired worsted, saying:

"Those are some things . . . my father thought you should see them as soon as you arrived. He wants to talk to you about them himself."

A moment later he was addressing Miss Marsden.

"I can't imagine what you're thinking about," he said. "You *know* we never do that. You really must be careful: this is awful!"

"Damn him!" Locritus said, kicking his desk in anger at the youth's impertinence. "Only the girls and the kids get it. Slings his weight about . . . won't stand it."

When Albert had gone to his father's room Locritus went along to find Margaret still with her head on her hand.

"*We* heard you!" said Miss Dilkes gaily. "Good for you."

"What's the row?" Locritus asked.

"Oh, something stupid," Margaret told him, in such a tone that he went away, under the eye of Miss Dilkes. Why did that woman ogle all the men in the office?

Later, Margaret came to him.

"I have made a muddle—Albert was absolutely right. I'm rather silly to-day—my poor Jenny's been so queer all night."

"Your sister?"

"Yes. The doctor's latest opinion is that she'll get worse and worse until she's sent to the country for a long holiday—a year or so."

"And can't that be?" Locritus asked thoughtfully.

"How can I? It's difficult enough just to scrape along. You see, there are only the two of us: my uncle Mallows won't help. Says he can't. I know he can."

"How much does it mean—how much money?"

"It's so impossible that we haven't even calculated. Quite fifty or sixty pounds—at least thirty to start, because she would want clothes; and I believe some of the fees for the place the doctor recommends have to be paid in advance."

Locritus drummed his fingers on the table and hung his head in deep consideration. If young Mallows had money, as he believed he had, here was an obvious outlet. True, it promised no monetary return; it was therefore outside the range of that gentleman's speculation. His father? No.

"How much to start? Rock-bottom thirty?"

"Oh, I really don't know. Don't you be worried too."

"I wish I could help you."

Margaret thanked him quietly: she knew he was sincere, knew that in spite of his flippancy and sentimentality—the stronger because it was hidden—there was

something in the character of Locritus that put him, morally, head and shoulders above the few other men she knew.

"Could you help me out of this muddle? That's what I came along for," she went on, showing the paper in her hand.

Locritus took it: the figures straightened themselves under his eye and ready pencil. In two moments the muddle was pierced and so cleared that it could never again be a muddle. Margaret's gratitude was extreme. She had time to make a fresh copy and lay it on Mr. Albert's desk before his return. All was well for the time being.

Locritus betook himself at lunch time to the Tarratonga Tea Depot in Fleet Street and nodded to a chess fiend whom he knew. He was waited upon by Kitty, all beautiful with a rose at her breast. Kitty smiled upon him, as she always did on her regulars, and held the menu card for his inspection.

"What shall I have?" he asked doubtfully.

"Steak and chips?" suggested Kitty, with an eye to his appetite.

"Last time," Locritus assured her reproachfully, "they were so long with steak and chips that I nearly had to forego my beautiful sweets, and it destroyed my trust in steak and chips forthwith."

In twelve minutes, little over the advertised time, the dish was before him.

"Roly-poly," he demanded immediately, for his

friendly sweet, most beloved of mankind, looked at him in tremulous purpleness from the menu. He dreaded the word "off" only when it applied to roly-poly.

Kitty was rather a nice sort of girl, Locritus thought to himself, only her hands were red, and she occasionally said "was" when she meant "were." He watched her as she dealt her pretty smile to newcomers or, head erect, gazed full at strangers who would immediately have established themselves among her cronies. There was no nonsense about Kitty: sensible sort of girl. He always missed her when her turn in the smoke room was taken by another damsel of an overreaching archness. He wondered what Kitty was like out of her apron and cap. Then his eyes wandered to his little book, in which John Selden made dry hits at his opponents and flung their withered arguments at his feet.

Seeing Locritus working still when she was on the point of leaving that night, Margaret Marsden approached him.

"Are you staying?" she asked.

Locritus looked up at her.

"I'm meeting a man in town to-night. Thought I'd improve the shining hour by clearing some of this mash off my mind."

"Can't you get help?"

"Help means double work: I'd have to tell the man and do it again after him. I shall go on till I fall in my harness—like a bus-horse."

"That sounds very tragic. Does it really mean that?"

"I'm supposed to be foreign correspondent; I do anything that Albert leaves in a mess; I do private jobs for the guv'nor; I slave morning to night . . . I'm a very fine fellow."

"Oh, I never doubted that," laughed Margaret. "They evidently realize it," she added, with a queer glance at him. "I wouldn't mind working harder, only they won't trust me beyond my notebook, I'm afraid."

"Don't you overdo it already? Miss Dilkes lives a milk-and-water life of placidity, seems to me. Albert's always letting her off—but not you."

Try as he would, Locritus could not speak flippantly. He felt something in what he called his "gills," and he moistened his lips suddenly. It was, Locritus felt, a burning shame.

"I'm all right," Margaret said hurriedly. "Goodnight, Mr. Lockery. I could work a great deal harder without feeling it."

At the first approach of intensity of the most occasional kind she made a point of departing. Sentimentality was so usual in her cousin Herbert Mallows that its appearance in Locritus, handsome, gay, and sincere, put her to shame and discomfort very difficult to bear. Margaret walked quite sharply down the street and home to her invalid sister. Frequently, as in this case, she misjudged Locritus, although her main suspicion was true enough.

At his meeting with Mallows Locritus felt a sudden change in his mental atmosphere. The young man was

Margaret's cousin and equally the cousin of Jenny Marsden. Doubtless he had thirty pounds at his hand —nay, he possibly had them in his pocket at that moment.

"Devil!" muttered Locritus at sight of Mallows.

"Ah, here you are, old boy," Mallows said. "How's things? Brave, eh?"

"Rotten!" Locritus assured him.

"Come into the Terradillo," Marrows went on, linking his arm in that of his companion. "This way."

They went down into the smoking room of the Terradillo, it being nearly ten o'clock, for both had been late in arrival. Locritus had once or twice been there before, and recognized, as of old, the hazy, smoke-heavy atmosphere, the buzz of talk, and the small orchestra pounding away with piano, violin, and 'cello, making pale and hollow merry din beyond the conversation. Many people were here congregated, from the journalist on evil days to the would-be smart youth, hanging in pathetic assumption of manliness, with lager glass in hand, talking flaming, drivelling talk, uttering conventional oaths, and getting gradually besotted with beer and the atmosphere. Women talked loud, and men muttered. The waiters moved about, poising trays, dumping down refreshment, dealing out change, all expressionless, noisy, and callous. Smoke blew across from all corners of the room, the pianoforte player alone being visible to the eye of Locritus, turning easily even while the pianist's fingers were tinkling in the busiest tunes.

"Name it," Mallows said, and Locritus relapsed into silent contemplation.

"Give us a drink, old chum," said a woman. He stared in front of him. In the corner he noticed Fred Lidstone talking to two men; they all nodded to him, and he waved his hand in return.

". . . idea is, you see, to buy up old Fitton's electrical business . . . willing to sell . . ." ("Who's in your way?—Look where you're going. Civil tongue.") "Only three hundred." ("Three hundred," thought Locritus. "Why, that's sufficient, and more, for Jenny Marsden.") "So I thought . . . properly pushed, might be a big thing. I don't understand prospectuses and that sort of thing . . . thought—*you've* got brains, and can put—— Damn this noise, can't hear myself talk. I mean the flim-flam that makes people buy, you know—advertising. . . ."

Locritus lost the sense of what Mallows was saying: his ears seemed full of a thunderous roar, and his eyes became fixed as he thought over and over again of the fatuousness of Dickers. He was roused by Mallows, who pulled a number of papers from his pocket and pushed the bundle across the table.

"Those are the things: if you're in one evening . . . I'll look in at your house. It wouldn't take you more than a couple of hours to straighten these things. I knew you were just the man . . . it's a good thing; I'm sure you'll see it's a good thing. And there's money in it—for you too. Look here," Mallows dropped his

voice to a whisper—"look here, I've got a few things coming off. Five pounds any good to you?"

Locritus laughed suddenly at that and shook his head, looking aslant at Mallows in a quizzical way that would have shown a cleverer man his mistake.

"I'm quite prepared to advance . . ." Mallows blundered on.

"A sort of refresher?"

"Well—I want you to do the thing well."

In a flash Locritus was on him and seized the opportunity.

"How far will you go," he asked quickly, "with a loan—three-and-a-half?"

"With a written guarantee," Mallows said, afraid even as the words left his mouth. Locritus had no eye for an insult.

"I want thirty pounds—quick," he said.

As they left the Terradillo the rain was falling in a fine drizzle. The streets were black and shining, with the lamps showing back yellow and blurred in the wet mirror. A cab horse slid sideways on the asphalt, proving the commencement of the downfall to be recent. Mallows paused and offered his hand.

"Well, good-night, old man," he said. "I'm awfully obliged—really. You'll find it all right about that thirty. Of course the six months will cover everything. It means tough work; but you'll do it."

"Oh, there's no risk," Locritus assured him. "Only

I want the cash very much. You'll get it all back inside six months."

As they parted and he turned to walk across Leicester Square Locritus smiled to himself in a dazed way.

"Damn him!" he said. "He's a devil, but, by God, he's going to pay for that kid's holiday."

The rain came down upon him all the way as he walked, but Locritus found that instead of turning off up Charing Cross Road he had reached the top of St. Martin's Lane. He turned then, walking through Seven Dials and up Shaftesbury Avenue. Along Hart Street the lamps showed yellow, and rain bespattered. He caught a glimpse of an electric tram emerging from the underground passage connecting Theobald's Road with the Embankment terminus. On the corner of a side street he paused mechanically at the flash of a cab lamp and the clatter of a horse's hoofs. A girl behind him, battling with the wind and rain, passed, all unconscious of the approaching vehicle. Too late she stopped suddenly in the roadway, cried out, and slipped upon the greasy asphalt. The horse swung back, the cab swerved, a sudden commotion seemed to waken the deserted street into life. Locritus stooped and roughly plucked the girl's body from beneath the hoofs of the frightened horse. It was done in the merest fraction of time, thoughtlessly and with only a dull pain of apprehension at his heart. Then he heard the cabman swearing, and a policeman in silent rubber-soled boots came up to him.

"That was smart," the policeman said.

Locritus still held the girl, a forlorn figure, shaking and trembling as the result of the shock. He laughed and looked down at her muddy skirt.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

Then he saw that he had saved Kitty, the waitress at the Tarratonga Tea Depot.

"Thank you, thank you," she was saying, over and over again. She evidently did not recognize one of her regular customers.

"It's all right," said the policeman. "Neatest thing I ever saw," he added.

"Where d'you want to go?" Locritus interrogated the girl. "And what are you doing out at this time, young woman?"

"King's Cross," said Kitty slowly, with recognition dawning in her eyes.

"Better have a cab," said the policeman. "There's one outside the pub on the next corner."

So Locritus and Kitty travelled together in a four-wheeled cab to King's Cross and laughed much on the journey, so that they had become quite good friends by the time the cab jolted under the heavy portico.

CHAPTER IV

THE FAMILY UNDERWORLD

A WOMAN of curious tastes and still more curious methods of expression, Mrs. Lockery was continually distressing her associates and her family by remarkable lapses from dignity and perception. She would upon some occasion say things both wise and fresh; she had the power to attract many of those restless folk of unsettled convictions where others, abler and more thorough in their methods, had failed. Then some mental process would bring about a change so complete and so disconcerting that her friends fell away, the ground gained was lost, her personal power became a ramshackle erection "tottering into precipitant catastrophe." As the member of a political society for the immediate amelioration of certain social conditions Mrs. Lockery misunderstood the aims of the society and the means to their successful accomplishment, in common with her fellow members; but to their misconception she added an erratic sense of justice far more headlong in flight than any they could ever possess, and a strength of assertion quite in keeping with the violence of her irrepressible errors of judgment. When Mrs. Lockery had on one occasion spoken with extraordinary

brilliance at a large meeting of her society, there had been present a satirical young man without conscience, without breeding. He said, as he walked home with his aunt, "Yes, but I shouldn't like to live with her!"

Locritus himself, torn with laughter and tears alternate, called her "impossible." He consoled his weeping sister after harsh scenes in which declamation played a leading part; and he cautioned her too radiant satisfaction at careless praise until her perplexities were trebled. "Our mother," he would say, "is an amazing and astonishing woman. Despair not, O Fanny mine; you will never resemble her. Your voice will never ring with passion—at least, we'll hope it never will. But you take her too seriously; you're too much in earnest. People who are too much in earnest have no sense of proportion. They scurry along, nose on the ground, overshoot the mark, become dogmatic—and, hey presto! very likely they found a new religion."

On the afternoon of one particular day during which Mrs. Lockery had buried herself in piles of propaganda, she took tea with her daughter Fanny in the study. For the most part the meal was a silent one, Fanny dreading to interrupt her mother's train of thought, Mrs. Lockery so dreadful of being interrupted that her logic flung itself to the winds and she became reduced to a state of nervous irritation.

"More tea, Mamma?" Fanny asked, half rising and peering into the empty cup. It was pushed over to her, and the brow she saw was clouded with anger. In her anxiety and trouble Fanny overfilled the cup, tea dribbled

sickeningly in the saucer in its return journey and sent forth a slulping sound when the cup was raised. Mrs. Lockery uttered an exclamation of impatience:

"Look at that! You shouldn't fill it so . . ."

"I'm awfully sorry," Fanny breathed, hasty to replace the saucer by a dry one. The very promptness of her action annoyed her mother all the more: it was as though she had been robbed of her just cause for reproach.

"You're careless."

Fanny's eyes were dark and miserable as she looked at her plate: the tone rather than the words cut her heart. She said nothing.

"My husband a stranger; my son a mountebank; my daughter a fool—what a family!" muttered the mother.

Fanny's eyes were raised quickly enough now.

"You mustn't—you shouldn't say that. They're not here. How can you be so cowardly! Charley's not a mountebank. You don't understand him—don't know him," she said, her voice scarce above a whisper but pregnant with all the pain she had endured in silence until that moment.

"They may well plume themselves on their champion," observed Mrs. Lockery drily.

"Quixote was sometimes right," Locritus observed as he came into the room.

Fanny flushed hotly and Mrs. Lockery averted her eyes. Neither had heard his key in the door, and the soft hall carpet dulled the sound of his steps. So while he hung up his hat upon the stand and glanced at his impish face in the mirror the final passes of the duel had amused

him. So dramatic an entrance, as it seemed to Locritus, was not unfitting.

"But is the question one for the family circle, Mother?" he asked, coming forward and taking a chair.

"I never shrink from the truth," said Mrs. Lockery.

"Nobody ever does that. Don't you know, truth lives at the bottom of a well. People seek truth: it don't attack 'em."

"Don't, Charley," Fanny whispered, her lips trembling. "She's not worth it—she——"

The effort to speak restrainedly exhausted her self-control, and she burst out sobbing.

"Sh—sh!" Charley said, and stood up simultaneously with his sister. "Don't be silly, Fanny. Sit quiet."

"It *is* undignified, Mother," he went on in a moment. "If Fanny's a fool, don't argue with her. *Verb. sap.* Continue your policy of ignoring us."

He went on with his tea, while his mother sat silent, and Fanny reseated herself in a frightened way, as though she still dreaded a deluge of reproof. None came, and Mrs. Lockery presently left them together. Fanny came close to Charley and put both hands on his shoulder.

"It was so cruel," she said. "I couldn't—I really couldn't help it."

Locritus looked up and laughed at her.

"Why, nonsense, child," he said. "You *must* keep that babblement in. It only makes her ratty and stupid. The only possible way of toleration is to treat her as a baby."

"You can't treat your mother as a baby."

"She's nothing else—to put it kindly. And after all, the fault's hers. If Father's a stranger, it's probably because his life is burdened with her absurdities. Well, we know I'm not a mountebank nor you a fool. So cheer up, old man. Wait till I get a peerage!"

Fanny insisted upon kissing her brother. He growled and flung her aside; but gently, as if her youth excused much.

"*You* love me, don't you, Charley?" she asked.

He put his fingers to his ears and made a grimace. Usually this was enough, but to-day Fanny persisted.

"If I hadn't got you," she said quickly, "I think I should die."

As the only possible means of dismissing the subject Locritus took her for a walk. "Women are so serious," he said to himself once, as they reached the gate. He had previously called to his mother, to let her know their purpose.

They walked quite a long way, through the streets, dimly lighted, into the lanes where there were no lights at all, with hedges on either hand, succeeded in their turn by misty fields and occasional overarching trees. There was no moon, and the sky was a dull colour, fathomless to the eye, but full of vague mystery and comradeship. Beneath such a sky Charles Lockery could never feel alone, could feel only wonderful and living, so that all his fears and ramshackle philosophies were tossed aside into space. Something of his feeling was shared by Fanny, simpler and of greater purpose, but

simpler only because her experience was narrower and her purpose less obstructed by the restless vivacity of imagining with which her brother's mind was forever occupied. She was thinking dully of a thousand occasions when trivial circumstances had led to similar bitternesses from her mother: they were all treasured in her heart, unwillingly and yet with a certain pertinacity. Fanny made allowances and no allowances; her mind beat to the time of her heart, and her heart was by no means a sure measure, for months of solitude had made it sensitive to a tone and overquick to receive a wound. In her mother she could not confide; in her father she would not; and Locritus could not trust himself to lend a sympathetic ear unless they were quite alone and she was very guarded. He so dreaded his own sentimentality that he was compelled to ridicule any sign of it in her: she had thus no confidant at all, and occurrences that might otherwise have been laughed away in explanations and happiness clung to her with a strength of significance from which she had no means of escape. She loved Locritus with all her heart; her love shone in her eyes when she looked at him, or heard his voice, or spoke of him; but her fear of his decision stifled the expression of many a doubt which he might have dispelled, and added many an anxiety to her daily thoughts from which she might have been free if her brother had been a little more serious, a little less mercurial and overridden by his sensibility and his humour.

"If I could only think quickly enough," she said to him now, as they walked side by side in the evening's

stillness, "I could speak to her and beat her as you do. She couldn't hurt you as she does me."

Locritus knew what Fanny really meant: it was the perversity of his mental attitude that prompted his reply.

"It doesn't do any good—thinking or talking about it," he made answer. "Partly it's Father's fault, partly ours. Mother gets nervy; she don't know what she's saying. But I shouldn't bother if I were you. Crying never did anybody any good: you can only bear it. Some day we'll go and live right in the country, you and I, and then you shall be happy as a little grig."

"You always say I shouldn't bother," Fanny persisted. "I can't help it. You don't know how living alone *makes* you think of it."

"Don't be morbid."

He felt more strongly than she did that what he said was ridiculous and beside the mark. Nevertheless, he said it; and would say nothing more on the subject during the remainder of their walk.

Left to herself, Mrs. Lockery returned to the study and resumed her work on the accumulation of instances wherewith to pulverize opponents. Fierce rage was subsiding into irritation, slowly, for her anger cooled by degrees only. It was some time before she could collect her thoughts at the point at which they had been scattered by the unseemly outbreak over the tea table. Mrs. Lockery only half realized her own childishness, but the gnawing consciousness of that part was sufficient to

destroy her equanimity. A knock at the front door came almost as a relief.

At the door stood a young man.

"Good-evening," he said. "Is Mr. Charles Lockery at home?"

She replied that her son would return shortly. The stranger said that his name was Mallows and asked whether he might wait a while. So he came in and sat by the fireside, looking at her with his narrow eyes and talking pleasantly. Mrs. Lockery thought him good-looking, as indeed he was; she therefore allowed her work to stand over for the time being.

"This is a very comfortable room," he observed, looking at the shaded lamp and the books showing dimly against the wall from floor to ceiling.

"The most comfortable in the house," Mrs. Lockery assured him.

"I suppose you and Miss Fanny have rather a quiet time of it," Mallows went on conversationally. "This is a quiet place."

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Lockery said. "But I don't stay here longer in the daytime than I can help. I am very interested in a guild with political aims: I do a good deal of work in connection with it."

"Dear me—how very interesting," the stranger suggested.

Mrs. Lockery was aware of the flattery and the invitation, and she therefore described to Mr. Mallows a few of the various aims of her society, and continued by demonstrating the particular views she held. Mallows

watched her as she spoke, shrewdly thinking to himself as she showed her tastes, and commenting in monosyllables. The interest shown in his bearing was especially gratifying to Mrs. Lockery, who had hitherto received no sympathy from her family or such of Charley's friends as had visited the house. She became more confidential, and, as the others did not return, they grew quite friendly.

Now Mallows was generally well informed of the family affairs of his acquaintances: his acquisitiveness of information made him feared by many, disliked by others whom he could not injure. With a perpetual eye to the main chance he made it his business to ask judicious questions, and he was further able to remember what he thus learned. It could not have been unknown to him that Mr. Lockery was frequently absent from home for long periods; even an unbiassed hearer might have found something remarkable in a few of his questions, crude as was the diplomacy which prompted them. He mentioned Mr. Lockery carelessly and yet clumsily.

"Your husband," he said. "I expect he's a worker in the same field."

"Oh, no," Mrs. Lockery told him, "not at all: his interests are very far from politics. I'm afraid our views are at variance about the welfare of the country." She laughed a little as she spoke, and Mallows caught the gleam of her white teeth in the dull red shadow of the lamp.

"You must convert him!—indeed you must!" Mallows returned, laughing also. "Think what a feather in

your cap! Surely your influence could not be exerted in a more direct way. I foresee a ready capture."

"I'm afraid you're wrong: he is not to be won by pretty speeches or sober reason. There must be some appeal to his philosophy."

"With your opportunities," Mallows persisted.

"But I don't profess to understand his principles."

"What! Are they so complex?"

"I've no opportunities for examining them. Surely a man doesn't profess his philosophy at the breakfast table; at least, he demonstrates its application to his daily life only indirectly."

They were moving from the particular to the general: Mallows headed back again.

"I should have thought no pholosophy so complex as to defy you," he said, watching her still.

"You don't know my husband," Mrs. Lockery urged in extenuation of her ignorance.

"I only know," Mallows said slowly, shifting his gaze and renewing it as he spoke, "that he must be a man of many activities."

Mrs. Lockery looked at him suddenly.

"How do you mean?" she asked.

Mallows gathered his answer, as it were: he glanced at his hands, which were hooked upon his knee.

"I imagined he must be," he said; "he travels about a good deal, doesn't he?"

They had come to this through his gradations of questioning: never subtle, because too intent upon his object, Mallows had pursued Mrs. Lockery's principal

interest through all her courteous evasions. He had touched with his finger the grievance to which her thoughts inevitably recurred.

Half an hour later Fanny and Locritus came in, much relieved to find their mother entertained so agreeably in conversation with Mallows. Locritus was especially pleased, because for once in his life a sum of money was near to his heart, and Mallows, otherwise unwelcome, was in this case the certain sign and symbol of capital —capital having for its outlet a purpose humane and charitable in outward seeming, as to the ramifications of which purpose even Locritus himself was ignorant. He grasped the hand that Mallows offered, with a grip quite honest and fearless.

"If you come upstairs afterward," he said, "I'll show you that I've not forgotten you. There's quite a lot of things to talk of."

"That's all right, old man," Mallows said. "May as well do it now, eh?"

So they went upstairs together, to inspect the papers that Locritus had drawn up. They were businesslike, persuasive, and eloquent; for Locritus had skill as well as imagination. There was diffused in consequence an air of good feeling. A check was put upon the table; a receipt and an undertaking given in exchange. The matter was settled as far as the pecuniary part was concerned: to Locritus now belonged for the first time the sense of working against time and against what is known as "dead horse." He found the occupation of

his next few months not less arduous than his most dismal forebodings had predicted; but in this first moment of rapture the joy was tempered only by the feeling that he was working for a person whom he despised more than any other man in the world—Mr. Albert included in the sweeping condemnation.

CHAPTER V

DICKERS THE BOLD

DICKERS found himself in the growing spring both restless and irritable. He broke his comb and swore, let trifling mishaps overthrow his customary solemnity, and indulged in generalizations regarding the way of the world to such an extent that Locritus grew almost aweary of so melancholy a companion. So Dickers went for long solitary walks and watched the hedges springing into faint green buds and the meadows discarding their winter desolation; and he dreamed in his serious way of happiness and sorrow. By a curious accident his ideas of happiness and sorrow were not unlike, in the sense that they held unselfishness as the supreme thing to be followed. Whether Dickers was disposed to be wholly unselfish he never examined; for, being a young man of little subtlety, his mind remained dull, and he vented his excitement by great oaths that were heard only by the trees and the hedges; or he struck the ground with his stick as he walked, the ringing answer sending comfort to his heart.

The roads, the hills, the pleasant stretches of landscape in Hertfordshire, particularly a few miles from his home, gave Dickers great pleasure, for he liked to

assure himself that England was rich in beauty and strength, now as ever. He used to glance to right and left proudly, with the consciousness of English blood, English stock, English possession.

"It's something to be English," he would say, and then think of Locritus's sneer. "You're awfully English." Well, if he was, what then? "True blue British," Locritus had often assured him after a show of prejudice on the part of Dickers. "It's a good thing I'm English," Dickers would say to himself. "Strong—I am strong—not clever. I would rather be honest than clever—but Fanny's used to Locritus; perhaps she despises me. I couldn't bear to be despised by my wife. Fanny's not the sort of girl to care for what I can offer: she doesn't care for money. She's so . . ."

Dickers could never put into words his description of Fanny: he simply saw her standing before him, saw the quick turn of her head, heard her quiet, clear voice. Insensibly he slackened his speed, and then stopped and seated himself upon a heap of stones by the roadside with his stick between his legs, tapping slowly at the ground. An observer would have confirmed Dickers's own estimate—he was obviously English, and he was obviously strong. His shoulders were not especially broad, but his head was well set, his hips small, his chest deep. When Dickers spoke his great voice had a ring of determination, and as he walked his heels struck firm, sure, and regular. Locritus told him he had read somewhere that such a walk presaged success.

With no relatives but his mother Dickers had always

been a lonely boy, and excepting in company with Charles Lockery, the only companion he had ever had who saw genuine quality underlying the solemnity of Dickers, he was but a dull companion, without "conversation" or responsiveness. With Fanny he was doubly silent, for his silence was so oppressive that she had never anything to say either, and both blessed Locritus for his merry inconsequence, which had at least the merit of dispelling gloom.

It was of one such occasion, when his friend had talked nonsense for five minutes on end (simply to put the two of them at ease after such a scene) that Dickers thought solemnly as he sat on the heap of stones.

"Why can't I be like that?" he asked himself. "Happy-go-lucky as he is, likeable, instead of morose. He seems to be perpetually gay, as though he laughed all the time —while I'm as glum as an owl."

"Hi!" said a voice, the voice of a man standing six feet away.

Dickers looked at him blankly, as if he had been suddenly awakened.

"Thought you was asleep," said the man.

"What did you wake me up for, then?" demanded Dickers suspiciously.

"Because I want to know the way to Rothesdale," said the man.

"Ah, you won't get to it this way," said Dickers, still struggling with his reverie.

"I should think you was asleep!" suggested the man.

"I wasn't," said Dickers indignantly.

"P'r'aps you're playin' the fool, then?" the man remarked, with a fighting ring in his voice.

Dickers sized him.

"If you'd been civil——" he commenced.

"Oh, that be thingummy-jigged!" said the man. "P'r'aps you'll answer my question."

"I never like fighting strangers," said Dickers with a certain joy.

"You must be a long way from home," urged the man humorously. "I don't know who'd carry you that way."

"*You're* a funny bird," said Dickers, rising. The man dissembled his dismay at his opponent's height and build, which he had not realized before. "You're a funny bird," Dickers repeated grimly.

"No," replied the man—"no—only thoughtful of others."

They looked at each other for a minute.

"Of course," said the stranger, "if you *want* to fight . . . I'm a little out of practice since I beat Cocky Sampson, but——"

"*Did* you beat Cocky Sampson?" asked Dickers with interest.

"My name's Barlow—service," said the man, raising his hat with an affected courtesy and scraping his left leg backward.

"I don't want to be messed up," Dickers proceeded. "Looks so bad."

"That's as *you* like," said Mr. Barlow, carefully nonchalant.

"Who *was* Cocky Sampson?" asked Dickers, grinning.

Mr. Barlow offered his hand. He had discovered a man after his own heart.

"He's a part o' my stock-in-trade," he said. "P'r'aps you'd show me the way to Rothesdale?"

Dickers accepted the hand and found his own shaken warmly.

"I never heard of him," he said, "till just now."

"No more did I," said the man. "But that's strictly on the Q. T."

Dickers nodded amply.

"I see," he said. "P'r'aps I *was* asleep."

"I'd been shoutin' all up the lane," said Mr. Barlow.

Dickers looked at him suspiciously.

"You're such a liar," he suggested hesitatingly.

"Look here, young fellow," blustered Mr. Barlow, "don't you be too sure of yourself. You ain't so big as all that. Besides," he added, in a ruminant whisper, "I might have beat Cocky Sampson if we'd been matched. But 'e hadn't no backers."

"Poor devil—but they must have known he'd get smashed up," Dickers assured him, as they walked together. The little fracas had done him good; there was no doubt of it. The risk of a fight always stirred his blood, and Mr. Barlow seemed rather a jolly dog.

"What's your line?" asked Mr. Barlow.

"Line?" said Dickers. "Oh—clerk. Sit at a desk all day, you know."

"No!" ejaculated the other.

Dickers nodded in emphasis of his statement.

"What a waste of brawn!" said Mr. Barlow, in tones that deplored the fact.

"I agree with you, Mr. Barlow," replied Dickers.

"Oh, not 'mister,' please! Robert Barlow's my name: esquire on letters, but among ourselves Bob Barlow."

There was so much innocent pleasure in his own jest that Dickers was forced to laugh.

"Now, look here, Jones," said Barlow, to give him his whim, "when you're writin'——"

"Why do you call me that?" Dickers asked.

"You remind me of a pal of mine. He used to go out with me every night. Dead, poor chap."

"All right," said Dickers. "It's all the same to me. What were you going to say?"

"I was going to say, when you're writin', don't you feel you must get out here?"

"I do that," Dickers agreed heartily.

"Same 'ere," said Barlow, nodding first to himself, then apparently at the landscape.

"Are you a clerk?" asked Dickers, surprised. "You too?"

His companion sniggered shortly and cocked his eye.

"I *don't* think," he said. "No," he went on in a high-pitched note of emphasis, "I have my trade, a lucri—what's it?—money-makin' bizz. Safe as houses. Not a word."

"Not if you don't want to tell me," said Dickers bluntly.

"Oh, 'tisn't that," Barlow assured him. "You see I'm

a sort of agent. I do odd jobs. I sometimes help gents in tight corners: do a bit on the course: turn my hand to little things that bring in the quids—Honest!"

"I see," said Dickers, who did not.

"Any time——" proceeded his friend.

"Thanks. Where are you to be found?"

Barlow reminded him of "a little pub just off the Strand" at which he might be found during certain hours of the day.

"Suppose you've nothing in my line," Barlow proceeded, "just now? No. But you can always find me. Do I see a hotel here? Bless my heart and soul! You'll come inside?"

They went inside, and Dickers left his new friend there, subsequently walking on to his desired goal; after which he returned home. During the remainder of his walk Dickers chuckled hugely at Robert Barlow, and remembered with joy how excellently he had entered into the humour of his new acquaintance. Barlow could not be more than thirty, he thought, with his billycock hat and his large chain. There was in his eyes a twinkle of such satisfaction, and a jaunty air of so much pleasant assurance, that Dickers was disposed to envy him a life of ease and contentment.

"What's this," Dickers asked himself, "but one continuous fight for life and money?"

It was an unusual pessimism that gave things so unhappy a colour in his mind; he generally looked with placid enjoyment at his savings, his monthly salary, his prospects, and his mother's love for him. It was Fanny

Lockery who had altered his mental attitude to these things, because, like her brother, Fanny was indifferent toward money and career: she had a liking for pretty things, but Locritus gave her a good many of these, and she had imbibed enough of his philosophy to feel that contentment was more than luxury. Consequently Dickers felt that his competence to keep her and live happily would not weigh very much in her consideration, and he was very much frightened at this disregard, for he suspected a personal inability to please so delicate a taste.

As he passed the house of the Lockerys on his way home the evening was gray and gradually deepening. He saw Fanny pulling down the blinds at the study windows, and caught the soft warmth of the lamplight beneath the red shade. It was irresistible: he went boldly to the door. Fanny ran to open it and stood right back, as though she did not question his welcome or his wish to enter. It brought his heart higher in his breast—as it seemed; and he took off his hat at once.

"How are you?" asked Fanny quickly. "Hasn't it been a nice day? Come in here."

She led the way into the sitting room. Dickers sat down in the shadow.

"Charley's putting on a clean collar: you know how long he takes," said Fanny. She called up the stairs, "Charley—here's Tom!"

A subdued sound came from upstairs.

"Mother's out," explained Fanny. "She's gone to some extraordinary meeting."

"Oh, what sort?" asked Dickers. "Fancy dress?"

Fanny laughed suddenly.

"I don't know: I can't imagine her in fancy dress: no, they call it an extraordinary meeting, but I don't understand what that means. I think it's to elect Mother president or something."

Dickers whistled. "President!" he said.

"Have you been walking?" Fanny asked, almost breathless in her desire that he shouldn't feel bored before Charley came down.

"Yes, right as far as Framstowe and back. Very jolly."

"Must have been. Charley's going to take me out to-morrow, in the afternoon. Mother's going to get her own tea. Think of it!"

"You have to work too hard," said Dickers sentimentally.

"Not really," Fanny assured him, and came and knelt on the hearthrug to toast some bread, for the year was still too cold for fires to be discontinued.

Dickers watched her face as the flames flickered through the fingers of her protecting left hand and sent dancing shadows into her hair.

"Could—could you be doing anything else if I toasted?" Dickers asked.

There was a distant sound of "See—hee the conquering . . . !" and a moment later Locritus came in.

"Good," he said. "Glad to see you, Dickerous. How's things?"

Dickers rose.

"Where's your collar?" demanded Fanny.

Locritus ignored the inquiry with elaborate disdain.

"You look so disreputable," Fanny told him.

"Where are you going?" asked Dickers.

"Sh—sh! In deference to my sister's wishes I agreed to change a somewhat soiled collar. I removed it, but catching sight of an extremely humorous work of my own lying upon my bed I have been reading it. The clean collar shall be conquered *after* tea, Sister, when I'm stronger. Nowhere; only Fanny likes to see me clean."

They seated themselves at the table, very happy; for Locritus was generally gay, Fanny always bubbling with pleasure when her brother was at home, and Dickers thrilling at being with both of them, without Mrs. Lockery's stern and contemptuous eye.

"What is it they're going to do to Mother?" Fanny asked.

"Oh—a most awful rigmarole! She's to be vice chairman or chairman of her branch. She's to deliver a series of addresses on woman's place in the universe, and she's to hold a public controversy with some man or other. Think of it, my son!"

"Shall you go?" asked Dickers.

"She wouldn't let us," Fanny laughed.

"Nonsense: we shall go to the disputation. What do *you* think? Can our tender Fanny continue in her present ignorance?"

"She doesn't mean women like me: she means brainy women," Fanny objected.

"I'm sure——" commenced Dickers. Locritus kicked him under the table. "I'm sure," Dickers repeated, heedless of the assault, "that whatever you do is right."

Fanny choked, and her brother patted her on the back.

"These flatteries," he said, frowning at Dickers—"most ill-advised."

"Leave me alone, Charley," gasped Fanny, as his thumps grew less gentle. She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief.

"I'm not used to compliments," she explained to Dickers. "It made me laugh in the middle of a sip."

"I mean it," blustered Dickers.

"Manly fellow!" said Locritus, addressing him—"and noble! But don't turn Fanny's head: she is but a child, though she uses the description 'woman.' She is unused to kind speeches." He would have wept, but his lowered eyes noticed an empty teacup, which he accordingly passed to Fanny. "More tea?" he demanded of Dickers. But Dickers had been drinking little, so full had his mind been of Fanny.

While his sister cleared the table, Charles took Dickers and settled him in an easy chair by the fire.

"Fanny shall play to us: or, better still, I will play, for she has a flimsy touch. But look here, old chap, seriously! Don't talk nonsense to Fanny. Wait a little while till she knows her own mind. I think she's growing up quickly now; but she's really more inclined to laugh at any such drivel as yours—you can see for yourself—than to prize you as a lover."

He broke off as Fanny reëntered.

"Do you mind if I go collarless, Fan?" he asked. "I'm going to play."

"In that case——" Dickers suggested.

"All *right.*" Fanny finished the sentence.

So Charles sat down at the piano, a small, old piano that made solemn music lose some of its grandeur, but was unrivalled for the rendering of delicate airs. He played a few bars of some air unknown to Dickers, and then launched into the sweet and plaintive old ditty called "We'd Better Bide a Wee." The application was so obvious that Dickers ground his teeth, but Fanny listened with tears in her eyes. When he was finished he turned to the music cabinet.

"I do love that," Fanny said. "You can just feel the sorrow of it. It must be so terrible. I'm sure they'd waited a long time already."

Her brother looked slowly over his shoulder at his aged sister, who had raised her eyes to meet the serious glance of Dickers.

"S'pose we have something jolly now," said Locritus.

CHAPTER VI

OF VARIOUS SENTIMENTS

KITTY dusted the table as Locritus seated himself. He was taking lunch at the Tarratonga for the first time since they had parted at King's Cross after the accident.

"Good-morning," said Locritus. But Kitty only nodded: he was a better friend than that. One said good-morning to one's regulars, but to a good-looking young rescuer one's manner might show more than usual kindness.

"What's the matter with the cuisine? No roly?" demanded Locritus.

"Didn't know you was coming," said Kitty archly.

Locritus eyed her.

"You all right?" he asked.

Kitty nodded again.

"I shan't forget it," she said warmly.

"I meant to say," Locritus explained steadily, "no bones broken."

"Miss!" said a young man at another table. Kitty took the orders of those around and disappeared. Locritus pondered to himself how he could best offer Margaret her thirty pounds. He had hesitated all the

morning, framing first the direct approach, the subtle attack, the abrupt indifferent flinging down of the money. He was by no means comfortable or confident. With such a girl, who could say whether the money would be taken?

"It all depends," ruminated Locritus. He meant that the acceptance depended entirely upon the light in which he was regarded by Margaret Marsden. Did he know her well enough? Was her anxiety so great as to tempt her?

"I wish I knew—I wish I knew," he repeated, without opening his mouth. He felt the words quite distinctly in his head, although they were not uttered; and all through the meal, even when Kitty smiled upon him, he still wondered. "She's sensible enough," Locritus told himself.

When Kitty came to give him his money slip he noticed on her cheeks a deeper flush than was customary. She moved uneasily, her shoulders, her feet, and looked at Locritus.

"I don't want you to think I shall ever forget it," she said painfully and with evident anxiety. Locritus laughed at her, showing bright teeth.

"Don't talk drivel," he said. "I'm constantly doing these things: bravery's second nature with me, you know."

But Kitty did not smile at his joke: she looked him straight in the face, and as he was still seated Locritus was at a disadvantage. The smile faded from his own face.

"Really," he assured her, with a sharp nod of emphasis.

"You don't mean it, but it's true," said Kitty. Whereat he rose suddenly and clutched his check.

The office looked bare and blank as he entered: he hung his hat mechanically upon the peg and smoothed his hair. Two or three taps of a typewriting machine in the end room attracted his attention. He went along the passage and saw Miss Marsden working. It seemed that his heart sprang to the centre of his breast and started to a gallop on the instant. He cracked his fingers together in nervous hesitation. At last, holding the six five-pound notes in his hand, Locritus adventured farther.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Lot of work to do," Margaret told him. "Mr. Albert is busy to-day—I don't know why."

"But that's nothing to do with you," Locritus said. "Why should you go short on your lunch? Indigestion's a bad thing."

"I can see you've no restraint," Margaret jeered.

Locritus stopped short. Albert and the exquisite typist would shortly return.

"You were saying—" he began hurriedly—"the other day you said thirty pounds would cover the first outlay for your sister's holiday. It happens I've got that amount —honestly come by. I want you to use it."

He laid the notes before her. Margaret grew slowly red. Locritus saw her mouth stiffen.

"No, no," he said quickly. "You *must* take it."

"It's not fair of you to tempt me," Margaret said quietly, and handed the notes back.

"I won't take them!" Locritus cried indignantly.

"I *can't*—really I can't."

Locritus saw in her eyes an expression he had never noticed there before: it was the expression he had seen in other eyes and dismissed as "knowledge of good and evil." Now he respected Margaret the more; for he understood that she was absolutely honest, that she could and would refuse to accept the money, and that she would not hesitate to give the reason for her refusal. He was determined now that she should accept it and took a certain pleasure in comprehending the strength of his own obstinacy.

"I don't care how I tempt you to take it," he said. "You wouldn't have me go to all the trouble of getting it—for nothing."

"You're awfully good," she answered, but with her eyes low—"and generous. But I can't take it."

"Of course, your Uncle Mallows ought to pay," he finessed. "That would be the proper course."

The notes lay on the top of the typewriting machine, and one of them stirred with a passing breeze.

"That would be the proper course," Margaret agreed.

"You've asked him?"

"At first: he said *he'd* no money—I know he's got plenty. It's simply that he won't be charitable, and we've no further claim on him."

"You know you must get it somehow," Locritus urged.

"Why not from me? Is that such an impossible undertaking?"

Margaret was silent.

"You're very proud," he said.

"Is that all?" Margaret asked swiftly.

"You refuse to be under an obligation to me when it would save your sister," Locritus continued, although he knew he was cruel. She shivered a little and sat still.

"You might at least tell me why," suggested Locritus.

"You've just called me proud," Margaret parried. "Isn't that enough? Oh, I can't!"

"From me?"

When Margaret answered it was in a different voice: still gentle, but uneven.

"You're very good, and wise, I think. But I don't think you can quite understand how I'm placed."

"You mean," said Locritus brusquely, "that you're alone in the world with yourself to consider; that to put yourself under an obligation to a man you know slightly is more than you can do. Oh, I see that, all right. But the point is this: you want Jenny to get better quicker than she would if she stayed in London. You must have at least thirty pounds. Here am I with the money. I don't ask for security"—Margaret smiled faintly—"I don't ask for gratitude or courtesy. I ask you simply to take the money and be done with it. I got it honestly—or at least semi-honestly—and it's mine. By taking it, what do you do that's ill? By refusing it you snub me for trying to prove my amiable friendship;

you do a foolish thing; and you delay your sister's recovery. There can't be two opinions."

"You make me feel very stupid and selfish," Margaret agreed.

Locritus would have continued his address, but the other typist came in, and he returned to his little room, hot and triumphant. Margaret was beaten—beaten without a word of answer—without a single word.

"Very silly girl," Locritus spluttered to himself as he dropped his ruler. Nevertheless, he was not quite as easy during the afternoon; for work though he did, his thoughts continued to travel over the ground of their discussion. People never seemed able to think a man simply honest—capable of an action to which no reward was attached. He remembered Mallows, whose sole aim was money and who judged all men by his own weakness. Mallows was only typical in this respect.

Mr. Albert's unreasonable amount of extra work during the morning was explained by his departure at three o'clock. He had given Margaret work for some hours, although the other typist was unoccupied after half-past three. She fidgeted about for a time, and finally obtained permission to go home. Locritus continued steadfastly with his work, although he listened for Margaret's approach. He knew she would come; and every time her machine became silent he expected his door to creak. At last she came.

"Go away," said Locritus rudely; "I'm busy." He would not look at her as she stood by the door.

"Don't be childish," Margaret exclaimed. The tone

made him look up, to see her cheeks shining and her eyes bright.

"I'm busy," he repeated slowly and apologetically.

"I'm sorry I was rude," Margaret commenced. "I don't quite know how to talk to you. I'm afraid I never shall—it's so very difficult to tell when you're serious."

"Always," interrupted Locritus grimly. "I'm always serious."

"You're not *now:* I can tell when you're obviously facetious. I meant—at least, I suppose I meant—that it's hard to talk quite frankly with anyone—particularly for a girl to talk to a man about personal things."

Margaret was clearly embarrassed, but she was as clearly resolved on speaking what was in her mind. Locritus looked away instinctively.

"When you came to me I was up in arms, as though I'd been caught napping. I forgot that you were you, and I'm afraid I misjudged you—put you on the same footing as the only other *young* man I know at all well. That was wrong: I *do* see you're different, and I want to apologize and climb down."

"Good!" said Locritus. "Richard is himself again." He noticed a certain excitement in his own voice. "You——" he began. Then he finished abruptly: "I knew you were startled," he said. "Now go away."

"It's ridiculous to talk like that," Margaret persisted. "It's dishonest and insincere."

"But, my dear child, it's my only defence!" cried Locritus. And they both laughed suddenly at his indignation.

"You seem so ingenuous," said Margaret slowly. "And you're not . . . I wish that you were ingenuous. . . ."

"You wish for further victories?" Locritus suggested. But Margaret shook her head. She was realizing that this would not do; that beneath their banter there was seriousness somewhere, and she was not quite sure of herself. The doubt came suddenly into her mind and made her flinch.

"I'm going home," she said, "to tell Jenny. Goodnight, and thank you very much—more than I can say."

On her way home Margaret laughed many times for happiness at this sweet miracle, as it seemed to her: that Locritus, whom she liked and admired more than anyone else she knew, had been able to do what had seemed an impossible thing, was curiously fit and proper. "It's the unlikely things," she told herself over and over again; "I might have known. It's just the sort of thing that does happen." From which it may be gathered that Margaret was one of those impossible optimists who make a dismal world ring with their laughter. Many people stared at her smiling face as she passed.

Jenny lay back upon pillows in a small Chelsea back room. Her chair was drawn to the window so that she might watch the deepening gray of the evening and the growing depth of the shadows. One elm, strangely alone and wistful, seemed to be murmuring to itself over the wall in the doctor's garden, where she heard human voices talking and laughing. Jenny wondered why they

were laughing and made a story about them as she lay there in the dusk. Her ears were listening intently for every sound, from that of the swaying tree and the laughing voices to those duller noises within the house that betokened somebody going up or down the stairs, or the shutting of a door.

"I wish Maggie would come home," Jenny said to herself, only half aloud. "I wonder what they're laughing at? I can hear a little girl's voice. I wonder what she's like? There—it's like silver, only richer. I should think she's a fair little girl, with blue eyes; you can't imagine a dark girl laughing like that. I don't know. . . . Maggie's dark, and when she laughs it's just as merry—but it's deeper. She's the prettiest laugh I ever heard. Can't you tell people by their laughs! I wish she had some friends—we ought to have them: she's quite pretty and friendly enough. It's this living alone: she can't make friends. Poor old Maggie!"

Of her seventeen years Jenny had spent three alone, or almost alone; for their landlady, sympathetic though she was with the invalid and her sister, had her work to do, and each day seemed to allow of less leisure. With three years of this comparative solitude Jenny had grown serious and introspective; her ideas, sometimes a little fantastic, had no outlet but in dreams relating to herself and to Margaret. She sat daily by the window, for she could not go out alone, needing the support of an arm in her occasional walks; and books, for which Jenny had no universal love, could not supply

the craving of her heart for romance and some life outside the contemplation of her fluctuating health. This evening she had cast aside *The Water of the Wondrous Isles,* which lay beside her on a small table: its unsubstantial beauty was too far removed from her restless mind, which no amount of contemplation could rob of its English love of the concrete. In a half dream Jenny lay back and shivered a little at a gust of wind. Then she sat erect and listened. A step, the soft click of the door handle, and a murmur: Margaret was at her side.

"I've so wanted you," Jenny cried, holding Margaret's right hand in both her own.

"But I've hurried: I'm early," her sister explained. "I've such news!"

"So have I."

"Oh, what's yours?"

"Herbert's had an accident."

"Herbert Mallows?"

"Who else? Yes, he fell down—or something. And he's broken his leg. Mrs. Mallows sent a card."

It was significant that she never said "Aunt Carrie"; nor was there very much justification for her surprise at the complete identification of Herbert Mallows. The girls had little affection for their only relatives.

"Mine's quite different," Margaret said, after looking at the post card. "Think, Jenny. You can go away!" She put the bank notes in her sister's hand.

"Maggie!"

"Isn't it lovely, dear! I was so afraid—but it's come. We knew it must, didn't we?"

"We always said so," Jenny answered with a dryness that showed her own secret pessimism. "How—how?"

"Guess."

"'Tisn't Uncle Mallows. No, no! Who else?" She looked closely at her sister before she spoke again. "You needn't tell me," she said; "I feel it in my bones. Mr. Lockery."

"The same!" Margaret said dramatically, to conceal a slight confusion.

"It's awfully good." Jenny could say no more: her accent showed the depth of her feeling.

They talked a little while of Locritus, quite frankly and freely, as they were in the habit of doing. From Margaret's descriptions Jenny had a quite good idea of the various people at the office, and in some respects knew more about Locritus than he knew himself. It is true she was frequently wrong in her surmises; she thought him freer from fault than he was, and had not seen him in unpleasant mood because Margaret only knew him as he was to her and to Mr. Albert, when her perception was blurred and biassed. Nevertheless, the two girls had a not unjust view of him: it was less fantastic than his own opinion and clothed in more sentiment than was desirable, yet comparatively true in its shrewdness.

"I suppose he wouldn't—couldn't come here?" Jenny said hesitatingly.

"I shouldn't like it," Margaret said quickly.

"Not for me, Maggie?" Jenny asked. "I want to thank him—myself."

Margaret made no answer. Her eye surveyed the room as her mind imagined he would see it.

"Couldn't he come to tea?" Jenny urged. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind. It wouldn't be wrong, would it?"

"I don't think it would be wrong: Herbert comes here," Margaret admitted slowly.

"Do you think he wants to marry you?" Jenny asked bluntly.

Margaret grew faintly red, but she looked at her sister for a moment honestly.

"No," she said. "He's quite sensible." Then her voice changed, and she finished almost in a whisper, "But I think he may want to—later."

There was silence for several minutes, while the elm rustled and the evening wind made the curtain flutter. Margaret closed the window and lighted the lamp, picking *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* from the table.

"Finished?" she asked.

Jenny shook her head.

"It's too long," she said. "I liked the poetry of *The Earthly Paradise* better, and the shorter stories. I shall finish it to-morrow." Then, in a moment, "You *will* ask him, Maggie?" Her hand still held the bank notes, which meant at the least partial, perhaps total, cure for herself, and contingent upon the latter, an ability to share work with her sister.

"I'll ask him to-morrow," Margaret answered firmly.

And Locritus came to tea the following Saturday. He was shown up the stairs by the landlady, to find Margaret at the door of the sitting room.

"Here you are," she said. "And this is Jenny."

Locritus made his way into the room, and to Jenny's chair near the window, without so much as a glance at the walls. Margaret saw that his left hand held a great bunch of spring flowers and felt kinder to him then than ever before, so much did she appreciate his thought for Jenny.

"An offering," he said gaily, handing the flowers.

Jenny thanked him, trembling.

"Why, this is a capital outlook," Locritus began conversationally. "A tree perpetually talking to you!"

Jenny laughed, vying with the birds in her glee at seeing him and hearing him speak so lightly. Margaret knew he was embarrassed, for all his endeavour to talk nonsense.

"I want to thank you," Jenny began excitedly. "To——"

"It's rather an awful business," Locritus urged, "for both of us. Let's say nothing. Really."

"Oh, but you must let me!"

"It's paralyzing. Far better tell me that my coming affords a welcome release from your sister's severe guardianship."

"Indeed it doesn't. She's altogether too lenient."

"A regular martinet, I dare say. Oh, I know how it is! You forget—I've seen her at the office daily—for longer than I care to calculate."

"Oh, that's very rude," Margaret put in, bringing a bowl for the flowers—"rude and unjust."

"Tell me," Jenny begged, "does she stamp when she's angry?"

"The office shakes!" Locritus assured her.

Margaret waggled a spoon in a saucer to bring them to tea. Locritus helped to move Jenny's chair to the table and then sat opposite.

"I recognize you," Jenny told him. "But you're not like what I thought."

Locritus drooped his head in acknowledgment.

"I am an exception to the rule," he admitted.

"What is the rule?" asked Margaret, querying his sugaring with raised brows.

"Two, please. Disappointment is the rule."

Jenny laughed suddenly. Margaret had not heard her laugh so heartily for days. It needed no great humorousness on the part of Locritus to make Jenny laugh many times during the meal. A fresh face—almost a phenomenal pleasure—and that face not ill-favoured, coupled with the fact that it was the face of one to whom she owed thanks, excited Jenny into an unusual state of happiness. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks showed a slight tinge of colour, and her lips parted in persistent smiles, so that for once Jenny looked as pretty as Margaret.

"I wonder if you would like my sister to come and see you?" Locritus suggested.

"*Would* she?" Margaret asked, while Jenny clapped her hands.

"She is very obedient. The change would do her good."

"Jenny can't start before next Wednesday week," Margaret put in. "We should be delighted."

"Is she like you?" Jenny asked, with interest.

Locritus laughed at the idea.

"She is a young person," he explained.

"That sounds rather awful," Jenny objected.

"It's not a brotherly description. Or rather I suppose it is."

Margaret's remark dwindled away into her teacup.

"I only used it to discriminate," Locritus assured them. "There is always a difference between a young person and a man. Imagine to yourselves a girl—pretty, I must say—constantly at home, seeing practically nobody but her brother and a solid British friend of his. Imagine her thoroughly simple and homely and very charming. My sister."

The comprehensiveness of this description was lost upon his hearers. They admitted its justness, nay, its shortcoming, on their introduction to Fanny a week later. On that day Locritus took the whole party out to tea, while Fanny and Margaret supported the invalid between them.

"I *believe,*" said the doctor—"I *believe* that a little more of that sort of thing would do her more good than a holiday."

CHAPTER VII

DOMESTICITIES

In a small house five and a half miles from the General Post Office, in the northern suburb of Duddsbury, lived the Barlow family, composed of three persons. Old Mrs. Barlow had sunk long since into the position of a menial, a person to do the rough work and accept gratefully the equally rough caresses of her son Robert and to bewail her lot mildly to her daughter Kitty. She was thin and gray, spoke in a weak voice full of pride of "my son Robert" or "my Robert," and had mastered the art of plain cooking with the endeavour of a lifetime. Sweets were beyond Mrs. Barlow; the Sunday dinner was invariably adorned by a dish of Kitty's making, and Mrs. Barlow's sole contribution to this more mysterious form of cooking lay in the collection of *Star* cookery items, wondrous recipes that stirred her blood vaguely. In spare moments she read serial stories in the papers her son brought home, and in those journals for every *real* lady which were introduced into the house by Kitty. Thus, in spite of her tasks, Mrs. Barlow was not unhappy; she could not imagine anything better, and the woes she mentioned to Kitty were recounted

only as so much conversation. Kitty herself generally laughed, and called her "old gel," as she heard her brother do.

"I do wish you wouldn't call me 'old gel.' It's disrespectful. Besides, it's 'gurl,' not 'gel,' " wailed Mrs. Barlow, pouring out tea that had stood.

"All you know," Kitty would answer. "It's what all the aristocracy say. Taken another leaf from the lower middles. First the feathers—now the pronunciation. Old gel."

Robert had listened sometimes with an amused roar. It was impossible for him to be decorous; all his expressions were broad, massive, grotesque. Did Robert enjoy a joke, the house trembled at the assault; was he displeased, the neighbours overheard his complaints. His language was stronger than his vocal power, and his hilarity a thing to make those living near laugh in concert. "He does enjoy his joke," they said.

But the Barlows had a certain dignity in the neighbourhood; for young Mr. Barlow, the only male member of the family, earned an income, however curiously, and it was sufficient to pay bills with regularity. The men who pushed barrows for the dealers around always touched their hats to him and thought Mr. Barlow the real thing; they thought Kitty Barlow the real thing also, for one could see on Sundays that she knew what was fashionable. Moreover, as Kitty was good to look upon, her clothes were so much more than fashionable—they were suitable: a thing that could not be said truthfully about those of her acquaintance.

Mrs. Barlow looked up over her spectacles with a sudden clucking of her tongue.

"I knew 'ow it would be," she said. " 'Ow they think of these things I can never make out. Clever, I call it."

Robert ate steadily; Kitty looked at the clock.

"That fellow 'Arold, he's given himself up because he thinks Mona did it. It says. ' "None shall ever breathe a word against her sweet name," he said. "Rather will I suffer in silence." And with that he turned to the constable. "I will go quietly," he said, his voice scarcely above a whisper. . . .' There now!"

"Well?" Robert mumbled, with his mouth full. "What of it?"

"That's all," Mrs. Barlow explained. "There's only about two inches of it this mornin'."

"Well, what's she done, anyway?" Robert demanded.

"Bless the boy, she never did it. No more did he. It's that what-'s-his-name—Spencer Morgan—that took the diamonds."

" 'Bye, Mother," Kitty said, disappearing.

"These things don't really happen," Mrs. Barlow announced—it seemed for the purpose of comforting her son.

He roared.

"Don't they? That's all *you* know about it, old gel!"

Mrs. Barlow trembled.

"I 'ope you never gets mixed up in that sort of thing, Robert," she said nervously.

Robert eyed her ferociously.

"Ask no questions," he said, "you'll be told no lies."

"My boy never told his mother a lie," she said foolishly.

Robert threw a coin upon the table.

"Don't you swear by that, old gel," he said. "Just you get a bottle of whisky to-day. I've got a lot to do this mornin'."

To Kitty the advent of Charles Lockery at tea time was something of a treat. She nodded at him gravely.

"Hurry up!" said she.

"Beg pardon?" Locritus remarked.

"Hurry up! I'm off in quarter of an hour."

"Where to?"

"Home—anywhere. Do what I like."

Locritus gave his order instantly.

"You're early," he suggested when tea was brought.

"Every three weeks I get off at this time," she explained. "It's the only chance I have of going anywhere."

Locritus nodded.

"Where are you going to-night?" he asked idly.

"I don't know. P'r'aps you'll take me somewhere."

Locritus was startled; he looked at her smiling mouth with a certain astonishment. Kitty, on her part, was secretly pleased at her own effrontery. After all, why not?

"Delighted," said Locritus slowly. "Where d'you want to go?"

"Really?"

Locritus solemnly counted the money he had upon him.

"I haven't got much," he said. "But it'll do. Name your place!"

"Go on, Kitty; time you was off," said the relieving waitress, her elbow on Kitty's shoulder, after the manner of the Duchess in *Alice in Wonderland,* her eyes round and languishing at Locritus.

"You go away," said Kitty gaily, and started collecting a cup and saucer left by a previous customer. The other girl drifted away unwillingly. Things were dull in the evenings, and Locritus a possible conversationalist.

"I shall be down in a few minutes. If you're ready, wait at the corner," she said, all fire for the adventure.

Locritus, left to himself, shook his head sagely.

"This is an unusual freak," he said. "A self-respecting young man can't be too careful. I'm in for it, though. Come, Lockwacious Critus!"

He drank his tea in silence. The adventure proved not without its points, for they went to Earl's Court, and Locritus saw people at the exhibition in such company as he least expected. He found, indeed, that this freak was a business of some slight value. He overheard a conversation that set him thinking; and he had some talk with Kitty herself that opened his eyes. Finally, as he reached home that night he agreed freely and heartily that the evening had added to his knowledge and that he had spent it not without profit.

As they sat in the electric train Locritus glanced at Kitty: her hands—he knew them to be rather red, but not oversized—were cased in black cotton gloves; and

without her cap and apron he would never have thought her a waitress. It was not that he was particularly snobbish, for Locritus had few of the more ordinary prejudices; it was simply that, having regarded Kitty as an employee of the Tarratonga Tea Company, he was surprised to find her look like anything else. Fortunately, Kitty had taste, and her clothes were not exaggerated: they were neat and suitable. Her face he knew already to be rather pretty.

Conversation was out of the question, so persistent was the rattle and jangle of the train. They sat side by side and looked in turn at the other occupants of the carriage until every one of the other occupants aforesaid grew self-conscious and all retaliated by staring at Kitty and Locritus. He wondered what she felt under this scrutiny, and observed her fingers twisting in her lap. Perhaps, thought Locritus, she didn't notice these things; perhaps it was only his imagination that the others seemed to be staring. Kitty put her face as close to his as her hat allowed and advised him of the universal scrutiny. He replied that it was not unknown to him. They agreed in railway whispers that it was very unmannerly on the part of the passengers and very uncomfortable for themselves, both quite disregarding the fact that they had been early offenders and that the baleful glances they now endured were repetitions of what each of the other travellers had resented earlier. At last the truth dawned upon Locritus.

"Everybody feels it," he confided. "That's why people go to the little seats that squash 'em up together."

It was a relief to both—to all—when the train drew up at the station, where most of the passengers alighted.

"Never any more while I live," Locritus told Kitty. By which he meant to signify his hatred of the long carriages in electric trains.

They entered the grounds and wandered about for a time in a spirit of inquiry. The evening was warm and summer-like; there were bands quite pleasant to hear unless you heard more than one at the same moment. They stood a little to listen to a selection from *H.M.S. Pinafore.* When that was finished they went on and expended their energy in various ways.

"Let's go and sit down," Kitty begged. "I've had enough of side shows—haven't you?"

"Impossible!" declared Locritus, secretly pleased.

He led on, and they found a comfortable situation, although the chairs wobbled and were hard. Couples like themselves passed along in the near distance while sounds of talk and laughter joined with faint music in a strange harmony. Locritus sat back in his chair and dreamed: the noises were not gentle enough for fantasy, but he wondered who all these people could be that kept up a ceaseless parade, a never-pausing chatter, loud, soft —in all tones, in all manners. Once he heard a girl remonstrating with a slightly tipsy young man; then, as they disappeared, another couple approached, talking with the artificial hush of a newly engaged pair, the girl's boots squeaking horribly, so that he spurned the idea of romance.

"Never wear squeaky boots, Kitty," he said solemnly.

"Why not?" she asked, following the squeaky girl with her eyes.

"Because no decent man will love you," Locritus explained.

Kitty laughed slightly.

"I might use them to keep the men away," she said pleasantly.

"It's a desperate plan," he assured her.

Then a voice struck him as familiar. Whose was it? Locritus strained his eyes and his ears to discover the identity of the speaker. Two figures came slowly down the path, the man small and slim, the girl taller and wearing a large hat. Locritus could hardly keep his mouth shut. Without knowing what he was doing he drew his feet underneath the chair and bit his lip; for the figures passing at that moment were those of Mr. Albert and Miss Dilkes, the resplendent typist who worked beside Margaret Marsden.

When they were out of earshot Locritus whistled.

"Such a joke!" he explained to Kitty. "My young governor with one of the typists! A small world, Kitty. But I wondered why she came off easy. You can't keep much from me!"

"I can see you're a very smart chap," Kitty said with emphatic irony.

"Ah, you've noticed it?" Locritus replied quickly.

"All men are," Kitty went on—"so they say."

Locritus laughed jeeringly.

"Well—my brother."

"Ah, your brother! The generality is feminine."

Kitty did not understand him literally; she was conscious only of the implied sneer.

"He thinks he's very fine," she said—"knows, I mean."

"D'you mean you agree with him?"

"Hs *is* smart, but he's not so clever as all that. He's not clever enough to see that—you know—that I can see through him sometimes."

Locritus nodded; he thought the mistake a common one.

"I don't say I'm clever, but I see things my mother don't see. She's wrapped up in him—thinks he's no end a good fellow. So he is; he's good to us in his way. He's free with his money, and he wouldn't let her be hit by anybody or insulted. But he'll let her work her hands off for him, and he'll shout if she don't understand—just as if that did any good. Sometimes I get so—you know—wild, that I say things to him. He says I'm a cat then."

Kitty had never said as much of her home affairs to anybody else; she felt desperately confidential at this moment. They were sitting together practically alone, and she could not see Locritus, and she remembered that he had saved her life.

"It's no business of mine how he gets his living; but *she* minds, and I'm sometimes afraid it can't be a good way. He's always got plenty of time on his hands, and plenty of money. And he's always thinking of money. I don't think he's quite straight; and I don't like his friends, or his temper when it's up. I tell you, I get frightened sometimes. He shouts and swears and says

what he'll do to Mother and me—— This is lively talk, isn't it?"

"Go on," Locritus said eagerly; "I'm listening."

"There isn't any more. I've never told a soul. I don't know why I told you."

Two men came down the pathway together. Kitty shrank against Locritus and caught his arm.

"You see," the bigger man was saying, "he's broke his leg, so the thing's at a standstill just now. Mum's the word. If he holds out long enough—I think he will —there's pots of money."

"It's damn fraud," said the other.

"Course it is, you fool! Ever know him when he wasn't doing somebody or other? What's that to do with us? We make our bit."

They were gone, not noticing the two people sitting on the chairs a little back from the path.

"There," Kitty whispered—"that shows you! That was Bob."

"What!—the big one? Is he your brother?"

Kitty nodded, still holding his arm. It seemed the most natural thing.

"Who's the man with the broken leg?"

"I don't know."

"Damme!" said Locritus, "I'd give a good deal to know."

They sat for some time longer and then made their way back to the more general throng.

"It's eleven o'clock," Locritus told Kitty. "Had we . . . ?"

He saw her home, and in the train noticed her face a little white.

"You're tired," he said, "aren't you?"

Kitty smiled at him across the carriage, her eyes still dark and serious.

"No joke, day after day," she said. "I wonder how you'd like it?"

"It would kill me in a week," Locritus told her. "I wonder you can stand it. Can't you do something easier?"

"I'm only a common girl," Kitty said bitterly, and turned away her head.

Locritus felt suddenly ashamed of himself and sorry for her.

"You *are* a poor girl," he said, with feeling. "But you mustn't talk rubbish, you know."

"You know it's true," she flashed, "only you're afraid to say so."

"I don't quite know what I can say," said Locritus honestly. He hesitated a moment and then continued: "You're a brave girl, and sensible—and honest. You can't be much more. Strong hearts are more than coronets. Perhaps you've heard that?"

Kitty looked at him across the carriage for fully a minute with eyes that gave nothing while they seemed to see his every weakness. Her expression was still grave; but presently her mouth opened a little, and she smiled with the greatest contentment, which reassured him.

"I hope you haven't been horribly bored," he said. "It's not been exactly gay for you."

"I've enjoyed myself very much," Kitty answered.

"You must be very happy," he said drily, trying to make her laugh by obvious means. "But you look as if you felt rather dull."

Kitty was stubbornly silent. She had no wish to argue with him, it seemed. The truth was that she had said all she could say; she had enjoyed the evening because it had given her an opportunity to tell somebody the things that lay nearest her heart: her suspicion of her brother, her contempt for his selfishness and his satisfaction. She was unhappy because she had learned that her brother was engaged in some shady business; unhappy, not with fears for his safety, but with unsympathy for his calling, his means of earning a livelihood. Moreover, Kitty was sitting opposite to Locritus, noticing his every gesture, and weighing in her mind the fact that he had gone with her that evening only because she had asked him to do so. Some part of her doubt found expression.

"You don't say whether *you've* enjoyed yourself," she said suddenly, watching him.

Locritus glanced at her shrewdly.

"That must forever be a mystery," he said, laughing. Then, as she did not laugh in return, he went on: "Of course I enjoyed myself. There's nothing miserable about me, is there? I don't sit glumly looking at you and saying, 'Oh, yes, not bad.' "

He drew down his mouth in such a way that she

was bound to laugh. Then they found that the train was in the station for Duddsbury. Locritus went to the end of the road in which Kitty lived.

"Good-bye," she said abruptly, holding out her hand. "Thank you very much. I *have* enjoyed myself. It's awfully good of you."

She was gone in a moment, walking briskly to her home. Locritus turned and walked the remainder of the way to Hampton.

"Poor old Kitty," he said to himself once or twice on the way home. "No wonder she's grizzly about that chap. But I wonder who 'broken leg' can be? I'd like to meet the devil."

And Kitty was lying sleepless, her eyes, hard and wide open, staring into the darkness of her bedroom. Her lips were hot and trembling, and she turned from one side to the other in a strange silence.

CHAPTER VIII

"MALLOWS, AND SUCH BITTER HERBS"

WHEN Locritus awoke the next morning he had dreamed, a thing he could not remember having done for months. He had witnessed scenes of frightful carnage at Earl's Court, struggles between hundreds of men, of all colours and sizes, but mostly prodigious; and the impression he retained was that each one of the combatants had lost his right leg from the knee downward. The manner of his awakening was sudden, for his adorable Fanny was on the landing outside.

"Charley!" she called again.

"What?" demanded her brother.

"May I come in?"

"Certainly not!"

So Fanny peeped round the door and finally entered the room, in defiance of his will. She stood and looked at his head, tumbled and rough, that lay on the pillow, and she met with unconcern the ferocity of his glance. "Father came home last night," she cried. "And oh, Charley, there are three letters for you!"

"Did he?" Locritus was startled from his general placidity. "What time? Why didn't he send us word?"

"Half-past eight. We had a telegram at six o'clock. Shall you want hot water to shave?"

"Did you ever know me shave in cold unless I was late?"

"Well, you *are!*" Fanny assured him with some pleasure. She dodged his pillow as Miss Mix dodged Rawjester's missile, submissively but firmly.

"Out o' this, bold face!" Locritus shouted, and swept her from the room. He descended, after a suitable interval, to the lower regions and saw his father.

"Hullo, Dad," he said quietly, for Locritus still felt some dread of his father. To his surprise the elder Lockery put aside his paper and rose.

"Well, Charles," he said, "how are you?"

In Mr. Lockery's voice there was a sign of change. Locritus suddenly felt that his father had realized the importance of his only son.

"You don't look very well, Dad," he volunteered kindly.

His father gave him a queer look. They sat down at the table.

"Sorry I wasn't home earlier," Locritus commenced. "I hadn't any idea you were coming."

"I shall be home for some weeks now," the reply came.

Locritus nodded.

"Until Fanny's birthday," continued Mr. Lockery.

"Good Lord! I'd forgotten. I wondered why she was giving herself airs. Twenty-first, isn't it?"

Fanny was close beside him.

"And *then!*" she said exultingly.

"What should you think you'd like to do?" Locritus asked, in mock consideration.

Mr. Lockery was watching them with an expression his son had never seen before.

"She's a big girl now," he said. "Setting up house on her own account, I expect. That's about it, eh?"

Fanny shook her head slowly and seriously, as though the idea came not amiss. Locritus felt as though he knew neither his father nor his sister this morning; each had altered in an extraordinary fashion. Fanny was quite grave, Mr. Lockery was agreeable.

"Your letters," said Fanny, unable to restrain herself.

"There speaks my little sister—that I know," said Locritus sagely, welcoming the return of her youthful curiosity.

He turned to the three letters by his plate. The one lying uppermost was in the handwriting of Mallows. Something stirred in his mind.

"Mallows," he muttered to himself—"Mallows—why, what——?" Then he cried aloud. "That's it," he said. "That's what was running in my mind. The broken leg!"

All of which was mystifying to his father and his sister.

"Oh, what?" Fanny asked, burning.

Locritus turned to her suavely.

"This letter," said he, "comes from our mutual acquaintance, Mr. Mallows. It contains—as you shall see when I open it—an intimation of the fact that he has broken his leg. Am I not wonderful?"

Here Fanny sneered at him openly.

"Didn't Margaret tell us all about it?" she said, and dashed him.

As he had supposed, the letter contained an apology —at which he laughed—for not coming to see him and a request that he would visit Mallows as soon as might be, the writer being confined to bed.

"I had a curious dream," said Locritus. Whereat Fanny hushed him until he should have eaten something, it being unlucky in her eyes to repeat a dream before breaking fast. He turned to the other letters: one was from Dickers—he, too, was laid up and wanted a visitor; the other was from a firm who had once sent Locritus news of a handsome set of volumes to be purchased on the instalment system and had "followed him up" relentlessly from week to week.

"Wars and rumours of wars," he said. It was a good enough quotation for the family circle, he thought. Then to breakfast.

Afterward he explained that he should be late.

"But not very late, Dad," he said. "I want you to help me with some beastly Greek quotations—I can't make head or tail of them, even with a dicker. Man might have translated 'em, only he didn't know himself what they meant."

In such airy fashion did he take leave of his parent.

In the evening Locritus called upon Mallows, whom he found in bed, very pale and unlike the Mallows of ordinary occasions. The idea of his identity with the

man mentioned on the previous night had soon faded, and Locritus was beset by a fear that he could not explain away a certain dilatoriness in his work.

"Hello, Mallows!" he said, putting on an expression of joviality. "How'd you do this?"

"Fell downstairs," Mallows answered gruffly. "It's hell!" he added, in explanation.

"Now's the time for peaceful contemplation," suggested Locritus.

Mallows swore violently. He evidently took his accident much to heart, after a week's stay in bed.

"Just when I didn't want it," he said, as though it might have been welcome at another time, "when I want to be about. Well, what I want to say to you is, Look sharp with those things. If I don't get 'em quick we shall be in a hole. Man's coming this evening who's going to work a little affair for me, and I want him to go through all our publicity things. They've got to be used in whipping around. Tell you what, Lockery, I'm in for a big risk—several thousands. I can't afford to risk a minute."

"I *am* a rotter," Locritus confessed, "but I've had a hot time at the office, and I've loathed having to pump out superlatives in praise of electrical things I know nothing about. I really mean to have a big go. Pater's home again."

Mallows shot a glance.

"Oh, is he?" he said. Then to himself, "Home again." Aloud, he continued, "For how long?"

"Several weeks, he says. Until my sister's birthday, at any rate—that's about five weeks."

Mallows nodded.

"How old's your sister?" he demanded.

"It's her twenty-first," Locritus said, scrutinizing his face in some wonder at this close questioning on a trivial matter.

"That so? I shouldn't have thought her so old. She'll be marrying soon, I s'pose?"

"I hope not," laughed Locritus uncomfortably. "How long do you expect to be laid up?"

Mallows shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said. "The blamed doctor won't say a word. He just says, 'You keep quite quiet and rest,' when I ask him. It's deuced annoying. Just when I want to be about. Have a smoke?"

Locritus refused and sat silent, for he was still wondering whither these questions led. There was something in Mallows that continually sparked his smouldering mistrust, and although Locritus was too ready in condemnation to think seriously ill of any man he was always restless in company with Mallows. Beneath his gaiety, due in turn to a naturally sunny outlook upon the perplexities of his existence, there was a strong incredulity, an agnosticism, as it were, concerning all the things crossing his path. Locritus was far from being a skeptic where moralities and professions of morality were concerned; he enjoyed his life, and made the most of it without any too close scrutiny, but he discounted everything according to his own peculiar religious view. This view was not "Think a man a scoundrel until he proves honest"; rather it was "Regard the fallibility of man as

a basic truth and do not build upon universal divinity nor upon any other creed that has adherents—take the world as you find it." His motto was *carpe diem*.

He was never in doubt as to the contemptibility of Mallows; his uncertainty was only connected with the degree. Locritus knew that there was something here that rang base; he was too wise, or too indolent, to define it. In the midst of his rumination he found Mallows looking at him closely.

"You've told me probably all I need know—in saying that what I've to exalt is sound. I don't want more; but where I feel at a loss is that I really don't quite understand the things, or your requirements, or the basis on which the business is to be worked," he said bluntly, displaying a troubled mind.

"Oh, I want you to know everything," Mallows said eagerly. "I want you to feel you're with us, pushing the appliances—you know *what* they are—as a part of our own impetus."

Vaguer and vaguer became the ideas of Locritus.

"You know what you *want*," he flattered; "you understand the contrivances; but I'm working with my hands tied. It is not enough to be given the names of certain electrical appliances with details of their operation and told to acclaim them. That sounds simple enough, but it's really deuced hard. Who do you want to reach—what's your aim?"

"Oh, I want you to know everything," Mallows repeated. "You must realize—I've told you—that you're appealing to the amateur, not the expert. You've got to

be lucid, clear, you know; but it wants doing slickly. I could do it clearly, but it wants to be done with an air. You're so damn clever, you can do anything if you set your mind to it. You take that cylindrical thing'mejig and say it's the most marvellous invention of the age, you know, and all that—then you say Professor So-and-so (I'll fill in the name) says so-and-so, and describe the working of it. Oh, it's quite straight, and there's pots of money in it—pots. You *must* peg away, old man. It's as easy as . . ."

"Come away, Charles," Locritus whispered to himself. "Your brain's reeling." So he rose.

"My kind regards to your mother and sister—I'd have called if I hadn't been laid up," Mallows said, in parting.

"Dooce you would!" Locritus muttered as he descended the stairs. "The dooce you would!"

As he reached the foot of the stairs a great knocking came at the front door; a girl, the same who had admitted him, ran out of a back room and opened the door. A tall, burly man stood on the doorstep, by his appearance young, and Locritus thought he must be strong. There was something in his attitude, the rakish cocking awry of his hat, that suggested a continuous fund of humour; but this was a hasty impression, gathered only from the dim gaslight that flickered with the breeze and made havoc with his features to the eyes of Locritus. The young man touched his forehead without removing his hat, and the girl drew back behind the door.

"Good-evenin'," said the man in a cheerful voice—

"good-evenin', Miss Bird. Mr. Mallows at home this evenin'?"

Apparently the man knew Mallows was in bed, for the girl greeted his inquiry as a witty sally and laughed immoderately.

"Go along with you, Mr. Barlow," she said, choking, and closing the door, so that the gas fluttered more than ever. "Of course he's in. Oh, don't!"

Locritus gathered that the man had chucked the girl under the chin, and he softly stepped backward up two or three stairs.

"A wag," he muttered to himself as he stepped back again.

"There's a gentleman with him," said the girl. "Middle-sized man, nice face," she added for identification.

"Don't know him," said the entrant. "No pal of mine. 'Ow's his dear leg? Better?"

Locritus clattered on the stairs and came slowly down. The girl went to the door and opened it, letting in the breeze so that the gas was nearly blown out. The man stepped aside, and Locritus could not catch a further glimpse of his face.

"Good-night," said the girl, as she closed the door after him. Locritus shut the gate and walked along the road.

"Now, where have I heard that voice?" he asked himself. "What did he say?" He thought a moment. "Something familiar about it. Name of Barlow: I know nobody of that name. Barlow—Barlow? 'Ow's his dear leg?' Leg! Leg! Why, it's the Earl's Court man. Then, damme,

it *is* Mallows! And that must be Kitty's brother! Of course, I remember his figure now—the same burly man. Now, what's Kitty's surname? If I only knew that. Oh, I'm sure of it; I remember the very tone. Broken leg, indeed; it *must* be. Swindler? I'm positive. But what a dirty scoundrel! Now, what's to be done?"

He was in a great state of excitement and talked aloud all the way to Dickers's home.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. BARLOW AND HER CHILDREN

"WHERE did you get to last night?" Robert demanded of Kitty across the breakfast table.

"What's that to do with you?" was the reply flung back at him in a tone no less unpleasant. After a restless night Kitty was in no mood for kind words or impertinence from her brother. She stared at him until his gaze grew stronger than she could bear.

"Be—cause," said Robert, "I had to get my own supper, that's why. And what's more, I don't want any lip."

"Do you good," observed Kitty.

"Your hair looks more like tow this morning than ever." Robert had pleasantries such as this. "Seems to be coming down."

"Oh, leave off!—always bothering."

"Well, why don't you answer your brother?" said Mrs. Barlow, elaborately pacific. "Where was you?"

"I was out with a gentleman friend," Kitty said, "and I came in, if you want to know, just at ten to twelve."

Her face had a deeper colour as she spoke, and she looked at neither.

"What business she got with 'gentleman friends'?"

demanded Robert, mimicking her tone. "Ain't men good enough?"

Kitty started. She had used the word "gentleman" as she was accustomed to use it, without reference to any class above her own. To Kitty all men were "gentlemen": she thought in a swift passion that Robert must have seen her, after all.

"What do you mean?" she asked roughly. "Where were you?"

Robert remained silent; he had cunning enough to read disquiet in his sister's sudden anger. The matter might develop. But Kitty drank some tea and looked at him stubbornly.

"These women," said Robert, and his mother chuckled affectionately—"always being found out." It was a bait, but Kitty ignored it. "Can't go anywhere but what . . . They're all alike."

"Well, don't do it again, that's all," Robert remarked later.

Kitty rose, her hand on the table, her face shining.

"Don't you talk rubbish to me!" she cried. "I won't stand it. I'll blow the gaff on you, my fine fellow, you and your fine friends with their fine broken legs!"

It was now Robert's turn to leap up.

"What the devil's she driving at?" he stormed. "What are you talking about, you hussy?" He followed her quickly to the door and gripped it open as it was slammed in his face. Kitty was putting on her jacket in the passage. He caught her arm.

"Now, my dears—no roughness," Mrs. Barlow said

with encouraging mildness. She stood aimlessly in the doorway, having followed them from the room. "Robert, dearie, don't hurt her—she was only makin' fun of you."

"Let go my arm!" Kitty said fiercely, hot and trembling, her right fist clenched for a blow she was not strong enough to strike.

"What do you mean?" Robert asked, his clutch tightening.

"You coward!" Kitty prevaricated. Her mind floundered in its efforts to discover whether she had committed herself in any way; she could not remember what she had said.

"You little cat!" Robert said, shaking her.

"She'll miss her train," said Mrs. Barlow mildly; "and then she'll get the sack. Oh, do let her go, Bobbie dear!"

"Let her miss her train! . . . You vixen, say what you meant!"

Kitty sneered at him, stung to bravery by her desperation.

"You'd better keep a civil tongue," she panted. "I know all about you—your goings on. You're a fine honest man, you are—turning an honest penny. Don't matter to you how you get it so long as you're not caught. That's fine morals, that is!"

Robert released her, for his mother clung now to the other arm and was pulling ineffectively at his sleeve.

"You don't know anything about it," he said. "You're a fool, my gel! Look out for that tongue of yours."

Kitty said nothing but opened the front door and looked back at him. There was an expression in her eyes as of knowledge bought dearly. Robert made a movement as though to overtake her, so strangely was he affected by the glance. Then he muttered to himself and pushed his mother out of the way, so that she fell against the balusters.

. . "*You're* a blamed old fool!" he suggested, helping her to her feet.

Mrs. Barlow sang to herself feebly as she brushed her grate and piled up cinders above the coal so that nothing should be wasted. It was not exhilarating to hear her, for the song was one of those which she had heard the organs play, and her execution was as weak as her voice. Nevertheless, Mrs. Barlow took a certain pleasure in singing, and would have continued had not her son, after listening stolidly for a time, burst out laughing at her. She made no protest; only went on with her work in silence.

"You ought to be on the 'alls," Robert told her. "There's a fortune in it—that voice."

Mrs. Barlow still said nothing, but continued scraping the ashes from beneath the grate. It was her first piece of work after breakfast. Her son rose and lighted his pipe with one of the spills standing in a jar on the high mantelpiece. He puffed slowly for a few minutes and then went out of the room. She paused mechanically in her work and heard him go up to his bedroom. Then

she sighed, loud and long, and put her hand to her side, where the balusters had struck her.

"Used to be so different," she muttered, "when their father was alive. 'E wouldn't never 'ave stood it. She's an aggravatin' girl, that she is; she didn't ought to talk to him like that—all we've got in the world. 'E's a dear boy when 'e ain't bothered; only she somehow seems to set 'erself to get the wrong side of him. And that puts us out for the day. We shan't get over it till to-morrow, and then . . . I shall tell her."

Still, Mrs. Barlow sat back on her heels, her brush and pan held in limp hands. In fancy she was seeing her Robert during the various stages of his growth, from his babyhood, through his first knicker suit, to the time when his father died, and Robert had said—she remembered it so clearly—"Come on, Mum, don't keep on grizzling. We got to pull up without him now. I'm going to be Father now." She could hear his tone, which she had softened into gentleness by long dwelling upon it in thought. He was a dear boy.

"Mercy me!" she cried, scuffling to her feet in tremulous haste. "I've never cleaned his boots!" Whereat she ran to the blacking box and lashed the boots into a polish, full of self-rebuke and fear lest her earlier failure should be discovered.

" 'E's right; 'e always is. I *am* an old fool," she said to herself. "But it's thinkin' of 'im. As for that Kitty, I'll say a word to her, with her fine lady airs. I won't 'ave 'er upsettin' 'im like this; it's too bad."

Upstairs in his room Mr. Robert Barlow was ignorant of his poor old mother's foolish and superstitious regard for her only male child. He was perfectly ready to accept in good faith the fawning homage she paid; but it was no part of his business or his plan to wonder what she was thinking about. Life was a thing of too material and engrossing an interest to Robert for any straying ideas on the subject of his dependent. She was useful, Robert thought, and answered, in her way, though she was past her work. He was in agreement with her in regarding his sister as a nuisance.

"I s'pose she didn't mean anything. . . . I told her, I s'pose, who'd broke his leg. Young Pipkins is no good; we'll have to drop him. I shall tell Mallows so to-night. He's got no spirit, has Pipkins; it's been goin' for a long time. He's a fool, that's what he is—don't know which side his bread's buttered on. Robert, my son, never get married: see what it does for you. Makes you wash your hands too often."

He continued to ruminate for a while on this theme, the deficiencies of Pipkins, to whom he had been speaking in Earl's Court when Locritus and Kitty had overheard them. Pipkins was a man recently married to a barmaid, of whom he already stood in terror. Robert remembered with complacency that he had on many occasions cracked the merry jest with her over the bar. They wouldn't easily get a woman as fine as her or one who wore her rings as well. Pipkins was just the sort of man a woman like that wanted; she'd manage him, Robert thought; she'd never be content to knuckle

under to a man like Pipkins. But whom could he find to replace Pipkins? That was the question.

"Wants a man," said Robert to himself—"a man with a nous; man who keeps his head." His idea of the average man, an idea that was at the root of his dissatisfaction, was of somebody perfectly willing to do a mean thing but with no courage to abide by an ill act. For himself, he laughed. It was all a question of attitude. To his mind shrewdness was the main thing, a matter of knowing better than your fellows. Cunning and bluff, bluff and cunning, these were the objects of Robert's tempered regard. Be successful and keep so; but never let any man beat you at your own game. With him, it was easy; he had never met a cunning man who could laugh—Mallows could not laugh; he was morbidly afraid, terrified in case of miscarriage, suspicious of everything and everybody. Well, Robert Barlow, man of humour, if not honour, was more tolerant. His was a tyrant's mind, but a mind able to see some of its own absurdities and most of the absurdities of others, providing they were material, tangible. For thoughts Robert had no sympathy, for scruples none; for fears he had gibes, for clumsiness and stupidity he had laughter; he was dangerous in his humour as he would have been dangerous in a fight, and for the same reason. There was nothing majestic about Robert, nor anything wide in his outlook; simply, he saw the main chance and generally took it. Having taken it, he saw the thing through with a certain pleasure.

After dinner he went out to the city, and then he went

on in the evening to see Mallows, at whose house he encountered Locritus.

"See a young fellow at the door," he said on entering the sick room, jerking his head sideways to indicate the stairs.

Mallows scowled at him and looked sour.

"Young Lockery," he said. "He's slacking. No trusting him; he's a 'Pi.' Wants watching too; he's keen as a rat."

"Didn't see his face," Robert said. "Young Pipkins is no more good. He's married and done for. Adjectival fine woman, though."

"Do you mean he's thrown it up?"

"That's the idea. He's in a funk. I thought he would be."

"Fool!" Mallows commented. "Oh, damn this leg! What's to be done? You *must* find somebody else. What's he afraid of?"

"Robbin' the widow and the orphan."

Mallows moved restlessly on the bed and stroked his moustache. His mind was agitated, and his nervous mouth betrayed the anxiety that beset him afresh at this piece of news. For a minute he did not speak.

"But what does he want, Barlow?" he demanded at last. "I don't see what he's after. He takes no responsibility—all he's got to do is make himself agreeable. That man's a fool."

"I told him so. I've been saying so. Everybody's been a fool to-day," Robert admitted. "But that don't help us. He shied at being kept quiet—he wanted cash; I had

to play the innocent and told him he didn't ought to worry so long as he got the oof. Not he; off it like a bird. Says his missis don't care about anything shady. She's a fine woman; carries her weight well. Young Pipkins don't happen to carry any weight at all. Besides, he's soft about women—not knowing anything about them; says he don't mind hanky with men, but he'll—well, he'll see us further——"

"Oh, shut up!" Mallows interrupted. "Anybody would think we were planning a common swindle."

"So they would," admitted Robert with a wink. "It's rude of 'em. They don't understand our principles."

"What are you going to do?"

"Ah! Well, I was coming to that. I know one or two nice young fellers—have a glass of hot and cold with 'em occasionally. I'll do a bit of touching—see how they feel. Just now we talks a little about horses—a mere trifle, just to know when the races come off. Somehow they don't get on as well as they like. They *might*—I don't know—but I think they might like to turn an honest penny."

"I was hoping young Lockery would bring those things he's doing. Can't get much out of him. He's safe to do the work—owes me a trifle. Some day I'll tell you about it—rather funny." Mallows chuckled. "His family's rather interesting."

Robert was looking at the fire and seemed hardly to be listening to what was said. His eyes were watchful, however, and his hands were continually moving,

from his pockets to his watch chain, from thence to his chin, and back again to his pockets.

"What's funny about it?" he asked.

"Not yet," Mallows said. "You're going to help me later. If this leg hadn't laid me up . . . Ever met my cousin, Margaret Marsden? No? H'm! She's a nut too. I used to think I'd marry that girl. But she don't love her cousin Herbert. . . ."

He rambled slightly, Robert listening with close attention, although his eyes were turned to Mallows only occasionally.

The plan which Mallows had formed consisted simply in the infringement of certain electrical patents. In Fitton, whose business he had purchased, Mallows had found a man originally unstable and unpractical, whose unsuccessful trade had led him to take gin. From gin he had descended to a state bordering upon bankruptcy; and with his moral sense a little twisted he fell an easy prey to the ingenious Mallows. The latter purposed engaging certain canvassers whom he could trust to use tact and address; he wished these men to travel the smaller towns in the home counties, and imagined that by liberal discounts for cash on delivery, or very soon after arrival of the goods, he could clear fair profits before any of the patent owners should awake to the fact that a march had been stolen upon them. It was characteristic of Mallows's caution that he did not in the first instance see his travellers personally, but trusted to the shrewder Robert Barlow, so that his own name should not be connected too closely with the scheme.

For some weeks Fitton had been superintending the preparation of the goods that were to be produced, while Locritus had been engaged upon the advertising material which it was necessary that the travellers should carry. So far, only three people were concerned in the more intimate details—Mallows, Fitton, and Barlow. At the right time offices were to be taken in Queen Victoria Street and the goods removed to a warehouse in the city, so that no stigma could by any means be attached to the establishment at Hampton. Already Mallows was in a highly nervous state; he realized the need for an exquisite caution; his distrust of his accomplices was strong; and during his illness he had been alternately sanguine and desperate, so that his temper had lost whatever superficial sweetness it might once have possessed, and his manner grew more querulous in consequence.

As his key turned in the lock of his own front door Robert Barlow thought he heard a faint sound from above. He stopped and listened intently. There was a dull thud, as though something had fallen. He closed the door and went along the passage, ill-lighted by a small gas jet, into the kitchen at the rear. Here supper was laid for him, and he sat and ate it slowly. Supper finished, he turned to the fire and refilled his pipe. It seemed to him that the night air was chilly, and he shivered slightly. Then he closed the window, pulling up the blind and looking out into the darkness. He could see the telegraph pole quite distinctly as they ran by the side of

the railway track. He pulled the blind down again and sat still in his chair for a while.

It was cold morning when he awoke, and the faint gray of the early light had forced a passage underneath the blind, so that the room was in a sort of dusk. The lamp on the table was flickering and sparking in its last sputters of light. Robert put it out and drew up the blind, yawning as he did so.

"Cold," he said. "What's time? Half-past three."

He stood there undecided for a few moments, then tramped slowly up to bed, his boots heavy and loud and the stairs creaking beneath his weight. The upper landing was in darkness, for it was unlighted except through the windows of the rooms opening off when the doors were open. Kitty's door was closed; her room was at the back of the house, over the kitchen; his own door was also closed, and he turned the handle noisily.

As he sat upon the bed, taking off his boots, he yawned again and stared at the flowers in the wallpaper pattern.

"Primroses," he said, noticing them for the first time, "I don't think." Then in a minute, his head still heavy with sleep, he muttered, "Go and see old woman."

This he sometimes did, whether in protection or as a mechanical duty; and he remembered that her door had been slightly ajar. As he entered the room he gave a smothered cry, for his mother lay on her back in the centre of the floor, fully dressed. As he staggered forward he saw a small spot of blood on her lip and felt

excitedly in the region of her heart. His mother was dead. Robert raised one of the lifeless hands and held it, looking incredulously at the dead face.

"Mother!" he said hoarsely—"Mother!—it's me, it's Robert."

Then, all unmanned, he commenced whimpering like a child and shivering with the horror of the discovery.

CHAPTER X

COMFORTING AND CONSOLATION

"My poor child!" Locritus had said on first seeing the invalid Dickers stretched upon his bed.

"Such a head!" was the dismal answer. "I'm sick to death of being alone, with nothing to think about."

"Nothing?" asked Locritus, seating himself by the bedside. "With a book beside thee—art thou empty and barren of ideas?"

"Trashy novel," explained Dickers. "My mother raves about it. Says it's the work of a lifetime. I think it's nonsense."

Locritus took the book and glanced at the title page; then he put it aside as a thing best undiscussed.

"Your opinion does not discredit you," he said. "You have the support of the most accomplished critic of your acquaintance. It is bosh, but it is the sort of bosh that appeals to the feminine mind. It sells; it will be dramatized. All London will see it as a play and will weep."

They were silent for a moment, Locritus for inspiration, Dickers in the turmoil of his thoughts at this opportunity for expulsion.

"I'm glad you came," Dickers said at last. "I've been

very irritable. My mother's been off her head, not knowing what to give me to eat. Why should you always be eating when you're ill?"

"The one poison kills the other . . . germs," Locritus suggested vaguely. "So I've heard. These scientific facts are difficult to grasp. My poor Fanny finds them in her 'Women's Gossip,' she tells me."

"How is—she?" asked Dickers significantly.

"Despairing. 'Morning, evening, noon, and night; how's Tom? asks Fanny "Crite" '—Locritus, you know. Browning adapted."

"I don't know," Dickers mumbled. "I wish you didn't drivel, Locritus: it's bad enough when I can knock you down, but it's worse now I can't."

"Well, I told her you were ill," said Locritus, hesitatingly. "But the wretched girl's excited because Dad's home; she's got mind for nothing else. There's an old play called *Woman Is a Weathercock.* And a very witty play it is too—if you had the sense to appreciate the Elizabethan drama."

"I don't believe you can talk sense for two minutes," Dickers said brusquely. "How *is* Fanny?"

"Didn't I say? She runs hither, thither: 'What's for dinner? What d'you like, Father?' No time for her brother or thought for her sick cavalier. No! Dickers, my son, plume not thyself on a fancied affection; give it up. Look at me—do I mope? Am I thin? Yet think of the numerous damsels who have my heart enchained!"

"I sometimes wonder," Dickers said, feeling an unshaven chin and looking at his friend with his expres-

sionless eyes, "whether you're a blooming cynic or whether you are serious after all. I don't understand you, Lockery."

Locritus rose, and the two looked at each other in silence.

"Why bother?" asked the cynic. "It's bad enough not to understand one's self. Reflect upon the eternal mystery of your own obtuseness. There's food for thought. I think of mine, and it keeps me going, most days."

Dickers stared at him as though his soul had been bared by his friend's speech. His eyes, still fixed and incapable of softness, had a look of alarm.

"I've lain here," he said solemnly, "and thought about myself till I'm sick. I can't put anything right, Locritus. I feel I want to explain myself: can anything be more wonderful than a man's mind?"

"You're too serious," Locritus exclaimed uneasily. "I don't want to be burdened with anybody else's nature. Why don't you kill it yourself?"

"Don't want to kill it," Dickers said; "want to understand it."

"To hear a chap describing soul torments is purgatory for anybody else," Locritus urged. "It is, really. You've no idea. Several chaps have tried to do it to me—more or less intoxicated, of course—as you are, on yourself or your food. The number of people who think about themselves without an atom of humour is extraordinary. When I think about myself I postulate foolishness and aimlessness, and the fact that I'm misunderstood, and

am unhappy, and all that, and I say, 'What's the good of living?' Well, it isn't any good so long as you take it seriously. You simply kill the joy of life by analyzing it in detail. All you can do is to say, *'Adsum,'* and hop along on your crutches."

His voice during this oration had risen to curious heights, not of passion, but of sheer vocal production. He finished in his head, as it were, and stood there, grinning idly at the muscular body beneath the working counterpane.

"You don't understand—you've no feeling—you don't understand," Dickers said, shaking his head. "You've got too many words, and I can't say what I mean. But I've lived in torment these two days. You're cold—as ice."

"Well, you're incoherent, if that's a satisfaction. Of course, you're quite right; I have got too much to say—it's nature. But if you think I don't understand you're grossly wrong. It's no good, my Dickers. People who think they are common-sensical must deal in concrete terms; therefore they can't express themselves. Look at that asinine *Story of My Heart,* with its bletherings about 'soul life': that's where you come out if you try to put yourself in words. You're not content to accept yourselves as units in the universal scheme. It's myself first and humanity in bulk. However, Fanny's well, and I'm well, and Mallows is ill, and you're malingering so's to have a holiday."

"Mallows ill?" asked Dickers. "He's a beast."

"The association of ideas is exceedingly apt."

They talked then of everyday matters—how Dickers was terrified at some inaccuracy being discovered during his absence from the office, how he had read the papers and had even turned to his algebra to occupy his mind. In a little while they played chess and were so rapt that Mrs. Dickers came into the room with her son's supper before they knew they had been five minutes at the game.

When Locritus had gone Dickers lay there for a long time, still wakeful, although his eyes were closed.

"He does irritate me," he said; "I feel my bones twitching. But he's a tonic. There's a sort of . . ."

Here his thoughts left words behind, and before they had recovered their position Dickers was fast asleep.

During the morning following this conversation Fanny and her father were left together after breakfast, with the spectacle before them of numerous dirty dishes and half-empty cups strewn about the cloth. Mrs. Lockery had gone to prepare a speech, that same momentous speech which they had mentioned to Dickers; and Mrs. Mullins, the charwoman, had not yet arrived.

Mr. Lockery never spoke much even to his daughter, of whom he stood in a little awe. He felt that she lived in a different world from his, that his common thoughts required translation into some new tongue before she could understand them as he wished her to do. With Locritus it was different again: they spoke a language understood by both, but they never got near each other's minds save by implication and intuition. Thus their con-

versation was generally easy but slow. Mr. Lockery never spoke to his wife unless it was absolutely necessary to do so; it was apparently his idea of wisdom that silence should be preserved.

"Would you like to take me to Salstead to-day?" Mr. Lockery asked.

Fanny became joyous.

"Really?" she asked. "Oh, yes. That will be jolly. Oh, and Father—are you going to be home on Saturday?"

Mr. Lockery prevaricated.

"Why?" he asked.

"Only I thought Charley and you and me—I could go for a walk. He'd enjoy it so much. We could have tea out."

"Perhaps you are thinking of the washing up," teased her father. "D'you think Charley would like it?" He was not so sure himself.

"We'll tell him to-night," Fanny answered diplomatically, yet still sure that her own pleasure would find a fellow feeling in the breast of her brother. "He likes going with me," she added without guile.

"H'm! There's Mrs. Billings—eh—Mullins, then."

The charwoman entered, carrying an unmistakable air of authority disguised in a threadbare servility.

"Good-mornin', sir," she announced in a voice between loudness and respect.

With Mrs. Mullins the method of address was invariable, but its manner of pronunciation varied with the person to whom she spoke. Of Mrs. Lockery she stood

so much in awe—having done battle early in their acquaintance—that to her she almost curtsied.

Mr. Lockery disappeared and made for the study, where his wife was biting the end of a penholder. He took from the shelves a book which he only found by long search, and seating himself at the window he commenced reading. It was true Mrs. Lockery's pen scratched and that she jerked her chair in moments of difficult composition. All this her husband bore unflinchingly and appeared absorbed in his book.

Presently, Mrs. Lockery, feeling uncomfortable at the silence, laid aside her papers and looked at him, her pen still held between inky fingers.

"How long shall you be here?" she asked. There was iron in her voice, that bit him.

"Do you mean in this room?" he asked.

"No."

"Until Fanny's birthday, I think."

"She's honoured. Does she know—is her anticipation doubled?" The sneer was apparent now; Mrs. Lockery's feelings were too strong to be kept in strict control.

"She knows," came the answer.

"You weren't here for Charley's twenty-first birthday."

"No."

"Surely it's an invidious distinction to make."

The spirit of Mrs. Lockery was the spirit of the war horse. It rose for battle with a sense of appropriateness. Mrs. Lockery never failed to provoke a quarrel during

her husband's every visit; being an aggrieved party, she had a certain satisfaction in throwing down the gage.

"My dear, Charley has too much brain to be paltry. When I came into this room just now I knew that we were bound to have some conversation. I want to suggest something. The reasons for my frequent absences from home are, as I have already explained, several."

Here Mrs. Lockery sniffed contemptuously.

"One is enough," she said.

"The one principal reason is enough, as you say. Nevertheless, there are several. Some of them are already removed; I am hoping—yes, hoping, that the principal reason—it is uncharitable to say so—may also be removed before long. I admit you have cause for complaint—no, I always have admitted it. But I want to talk of one other thing now. Are you willing that I should take Fanny away with me when I go?"

Mrs. Lockery almost rose to her feet.

"No!" she said fiercely; "I'm not."

Mr. Lockery was quite white now, as moved as she could have wished him to be in face of her refusal.

"Do you—would you miss her so much?" he asked.

"I won't let her go!"

"Yet she's not happy."

"You always say that. I tell you she's everything she wants. She has time to herself, Charley to play with —her interests are small because she's just an average girl—at the kindest."

"I don't know why, but you seem invariably to be

unfair when you talk about your children," Mr. Lockery interrupted angrily. "There is no need to be vulgar, even in anger. They are good and sensible—Fanny is neglected and unhappy. As you say, Charley is her only friend, and I dare say he misunderstands her, and she him, as they're so unlike. If she came with me I think she would be happier, and I'm sure you would hardly miss her except in her menial position. You could easily have what you could have afforded before—a maid or even two maids."

"How can you throw at me . . . I am perfectly kind: it is simply her stubborn nature that makes her ignore me. Fanny's artful in saying to you what she would not dare to say to me. I will not have prying servants."

"Very well; but once Fanny is of age I shall feel no scruples. Remember, I shan't consider you at all then."

Mr. Lockery closed his book and walked across the room to replace it upon the shelves. His wife followed him.

"You persistently insult and ignore me and my feelings," she said quietly. "Can you wonder I am angry and hurt?"

Mr. Lockery turned back.

"Helen," he said, and his hand moved toward her, "we might be so much happier."

"You loved me."

"Can you doubt me?"

"You make it hard to believe in you . . . have done all the time," Mrs. Lockery whispered.

"We're grown old—I'm grown old. It shouldn't be so

hard to make up the lost ground. We always struggle, you and I. Can't you be more tolerant?"

They were facing each other, and his wife seemed to Mr. Lockery again the sweetheart of his youth. She turned away suddenly.

"No," she said; "I've suffered too much."

Mr. Lockery replaced the book on the shelf and went slowly out of the room, with neither a word nor a backward glance. His wife sat once more at the table and commenced to cry quietly.

As they shared the housework Fanny and Mrs. Mullins talked together—or rather, Fanny washed up the breakfast things and Mrs. Mullins talked as she polished the grate.

"You know, men's so funny," she said. "Oh, you'll find it for yourself, my dear, and I 'ope he'll be as handsome as you deserve—bonny. My 'usband, 'e says, 'No, Mother,' he says—always calls me Mother, like the kiddies—'I can't take this 'addock,' he says. 'What's the matter with the 'addock?' I says. Oh—you know 'ow it is: he didn't want it. 'Well,' I says, 'of course, if you've been drinkin' . . .' just like that, I say it—'if you've been drinkin' I can understand it.' He was so snappy; asked me where I thought he found the money for it—'s if I knew. . . ."

Fanny lost the thread of the discourse, as she generally did before it had been in progress more than two minutes. She grunted when there seemed an interrogation in the

voice of Mrs. Mullins, and then thought of Charley's little poem:

'Tis the voice of the Mullins, I hear her complain,
My unfortunate husband I've rendered insane;
And now his insatiable cruelty I'll b'wail,
For there's no chance of peace when I'm under full sail.

It was not great poetry, Fanny admitted, with its scampering syllables, but, as Charley had said, the lines "had their pathos."

" 'Well,' I told 'er, ' 'tisn't for me to complain,' I said. 'I'm not one of *that* sort,' I said. 'Whatever 'e may do,' I said, 'I 'ope I shan't forget I'm a lady,' I said. She never said another word."

Mr. Lockery came in at the door as the thrilling story paused. He gave a comical glance at the kneeling figure of Mrs. Mullins.

"I suppose you're not ready to go out this morning?" he said.

Fanny shook her head.

"You can't go dinnerless," she observed; "at least, I can't."

Mrs. Mullins bustled out of the room with her brushes, after a glance over her shoulder. Mr. Lockery put his hand on his daughter's arm, just where it emerged from the dish water; she felt his clasp to be quite firm and his hand cold.

"Look here, Fanny, are you still miserable?"

Fanny looked straight at him.

"I don't know," she said honestly. "I love you and

Charley—awfully. Oh, I'm really all right. Only I get lonely when you're not at home. 'Cause Charley's not here in the long daytime. He's a dear boy."

"And don't you love your mother a little?" he asked almost pleadingly.

"Oh, yes—a great deal!" Fanny said hastily.

"What a lack-lustre voice!" Mr. Lockery laughed.

"She's a little—difficult," Fanny supplemented, whereat he laughed again, this time as though he were amused; for he recognized that the phrase was not her own but Charley's.

"True," he admitted, with a puzzling look—"true. But you should try to understand her. You could make her a lot happier that way."

Fanny looked at him again, and her head shook slowly from side to side. She was not conscious of the movement until it was past. Then she tried to explain it.

"I *have* tried," she said—"I really have; I've been so sorry for her. Charley says it's been pathetic to see me trying."

Her tone was so woebegone that Mrs. Mullins re-entered to the sound of a peal of hearty laughter. Her father patted Fanny on the back.

"If at first . . ." he said suggestively. "I'm going to."

But upon his mouth as he made the confession there was a wry smile that seemed to his daughter inscrutable.

CHAPTER XI

A PICNIC AND A QUESTION

THE friendship that had seemed to ripen between Locritus and Margaret during the short time immediately preceding Jenny's departure for a healthier home failed again after she had gone. It was not that either of them was conscious of feeling differently; their regard for each other remained healthy and free from heroics. The reason was simply that without a wider ground they could not continue upon the same footing: when both had a rallying point in the invalid girl, a source of uneasiness was removed; they found intercourse simple and natural. Subsequently, although to do Locritus justice he employed Fanny as an object of common interest, it was a half-hearted effort. They were still friends, and had not quite relapsed into the former degree of sedateness; but for a time there was no more visiting, and Locritus was compelled to return to his reserved air of paternal regard.

It was, however, Fanny's turn to become active. Her brain, delicate, but not so small or as inefficient as her mother suggested, was at times quick. She liked Margaret Marsden, and having no girl friend she employed a feminine gift of pertinacity which shamed her brother.

Fanny therefore wrote to Margaret and invited her to picnic with them on Saturday afternoon—her father, she said, would be one of the party; but Margaret need have no fear, for he was an exceedingly amiable man and quite kind. Margaret received the letter by the first post and thought joyfully of the prospect all the way to the office. A picnic, if next Saturday were as warm and pleasant as the one previous had been, would hold many gradations of delight. She beamed upon Mr. Albert as she walked past him, and nodded at Locritus in his little box, and was even quite abnormally pleasant to the perfect lady who typed beside her all day and interrupted her with stories, the only point of which was her further right to the title of breeding. It seemed that Mr. Albert would never go to see his father that morning; he hung about in a most irritating way. Usually Mr. Albert's movements affected Margaret only slightly; this morning their conduct was so irritating that she began to wonder whether Mr. Albert were unwell.

As last he went into the comfortable office, and after a pause Margaret rose and went along to the compartment in which Locritus worked.

"Did your sister say she had written to me?" she began rapidly.

Locritus eyed her.

"No," he said. "Beggin' letter?"

"Perhaps you're not going?" suggested Margaret, disappointed.

"Where?"

"She's asked me to picnic on Saturday!" Mar-

garet retained only a percentage of her enthusiasm.

"My sister Fanny! Who's going?"

"She mentioned your father—one of the party."

"This is dirty work," said Locritus horribly—"behind my back! My father is a mere slave; did she ignore me?"

"Well, I understood—it never occurred to me that you *wouldn't* be going," Margaret explained.

"Then I will go," Locritus said with energy and determination. "Nothing shall prevent it. I remember young Fan was very secret last night; she gave me no sugar this morning. . . . Yes, Miss Marsden, you may safely accept."

So Margaret accepted, and Mr. Albert came back to find the staff busy still, as though he had not been away. He entered into conversation with Miss Dilkes in a rallying manner. Locritus listened in a dream. He could not fathom Mr. Albert; he believed there was nothing to find, that Mr. Albert was just a type, commonplace and uninteresting; but he often wondered whether the young man might not be an original after all.

To their picnic the four voyagers took a great quantity of gaiety—at least the three younger members did. Locritus had solemnly assured Fanny that he would not go because he had not been asked first; and it was only after his sister had spent some moments in persuasion and threatened to become perilously affectionate that he gave in. All this made a pleasant introductory topic of conversation between the girls, who next turned

their attention to the two men, engaged laboriously in carrying and concealing about their persons various utensils which it had been found impossible to squeeze into the basket. The spring day had the flare of early summer, and the birds were everywhere vocal and triumphant. Margaret saw for the first time, in ideal conditions, the great distances which surrounded the home of the Lockerys with rolling meadows and pasture lands, topped here and there by a farm or a church, sprung from heaven knows where, settled among the green like emblems of man's needs and occupations. She heard the strange sounds of the country with all a Londoner's joy, and watched the winding white roads until they disappeared behind a dark patch of trees, or round a hillock, sometimes to reappear later, and, again, to vanish from sight completely.

Margaret turned a flushed face and sparkling eyes to Locritus.

"It's so lovely," she said, "and so new!"

She became aware of Mr. Lockery's shrewd dark eyes with their noncommittal smile, and grew curious as well as shy of him. He was quite different from Locritus and Fanny, Margaret thought—old, tired, yet restless. At any rate, he was interesting. She had not seen Mrs. Lockery. What was she like? Margaret wondered. A great deal depended upon that, she decided, with slightly puckered brow. A man like Mr. Lockery . . . if he resembled his son . . . no, he was quite unlike . . .

Locritus was talking quickly to his father; it seemed to be about art, about the artist's attitude to life and his

portrayal of realities. What did he know about it? she inquired of herself: perhaps there was almost a suspicion at his readiness. Yet Mr. Lockery was listening gravely, if a little indulgently. She heard him object once, and found a certain pleasure in noticing that Locritus maintained his ground and silenced his father's dissent so thoroughly that Mr. Lockery nodded his head once, in acceptance.

". . . She's not really common-minded, but she says the oddest things," Fanny was saying when Margaret became conscious of another voice. "Charley makes fun of her and poetry about her—very bad poetry, he admits—and she never knows whether he's laughing at her or not. She gets so uncomfortable, can't keep still—you know, bridles and talks to herself. It's so ridiculous; her husband's a poor meek little man, but she tells of his ill-treatment. I'm sure he's frightened to death of her. . . ."

It was of Mrs. Mullins Fanny spoke. Margaret smiled at her and made no attempt to reply. It was a new pleasure for her, just as it was a new pleasure for Fanny, to talk to a girl of her own kind.

"You're very fortunate," Margaret said impulsively, in a minute, indicating the two figures ahead.

"I know—but I don't see much of Papa. He's away so much."

"You have your mother, though: I haven't anybody now."

"How is Jenny getting on?"

"I had the funniest letter—she was quite lively and

joked about the people and the doctor who comes to see her. I think she's better already. She said she only wanted me there to be quite happy. Of course, she's so used to being at home. It's a great change for her; and I don't expect it's altogether comfortable yet. She's written almost every day—a sort of journal."

"Is that Jenny?" asked Locritus over his shoulder.

"Yes," called Margaret; "she wished to be remembered to you both."

Locritus raised his hat, quite seriously, and apparently in acknowledgment. Margaret heard him telling some details of Jenny to his father: she could not hear that he mentioned the means by which her sister had been sent away from London.

Their destination was a pleasant hollow, sheltered by trees and undergrowth from the wind, the branches being still furnished too scantily to keep off the sun, which shone in noble fashion. Below them was a great stretch of green, checked at its farthest edge by a wide surface of housetops, with a towering factory chimney, shorn for the afternoon of its ugly and uglifying smoke. They felt the houses were quite near, because the day was so fresh that the distance was made deceptively small.

"You couldn't have chosen a better place than this, Fanny," Mr. Lockery said. "It has all the advantages."

"Shall I undo the basket?" asked Locritus gently.

"I knew it!" declared Fanny. "I expect he ate enormously at lunch. I remember he did."

"Watched!" wailed Locritus. "Begrudged! One's

sister. Oh, bitter! It is time, isn't it, Dad? One can't walk very fast laden and in company." He winked at his father, who assured Fanny that it was "quite all right." So the preparations commenced forthwith.

Margaret helped with the plate setting and was secretly charmed at the repast; after all, a picnic is but half a picnic if one may not gloat over the viands in contemplating them.

"Father and I devised the programme," Fanny said proudly, at the shout Locritus gave.

"It is very charming," Margaret admitted, and became aware that Mr. Lockery was looking at her closely, as though her curiosity concerning himself had become evident and he intended to repay it in kind Her embarrassment at this time was nothing compared with what she felt when his scrutiny was transferred from her to Locritus. The association of ideas—however it may have lain dormant in her own mind—was unmistakable. Her cheeks grew warm when she found Locritus smiling at her slowly, particularly as she had not the courage to discover what was the expression in his eyes.

The kettle grew restive, and the lid rattled suddenly, so that it had to be hastily removed from the stove. They ate placidly, with every now and then a slight breeze blowing the leaves above them.

"Won't do to be too late," Locritus observed. "The wind will get chilly presently. Not yet, of course."

On the homeward journey Margaret and Locritus walked together. She hardly knew what to talk about, could only say the afternoon had been splendid, that

she had enjoyed it all the more because of its being a new experience.

"Jan and I go out sometimes in the summer," Lorimer told her. "It's pleasanter then—perhaps you'd care to come sometime. She'd be very grateful. It's not as jolly for her as it might be; she gets desperate."

"Doesn't everybody?"

"Life is full of melancholy."

"I mean," laughed Margaret, "to be full of platitudes."

"One can't describe it but in platitude; it is so platitudinous," Lorimer explained. "Examine it for yourself."

"I'd rather not—now," said Margaret wisely. "Leave that to loneliness. 'Gather ye rosebuds.'"

"I should have thought," Lorimer said deliberately, "that with all your gravity you were happy. I don't mean you're funereal. Fanny is, in her darker moments. She's pessimistical in the extreme."

"Do you know where I'm going to-morrow?" she asked suddenly. "To see Herbert Mallows. He's still laid up, I think. I ought really to have gone long ago; but you know how you put off things that are distasteful. Mrs. Mallows, my aunt, will be as rude and as grim as you could imagine. She makes me excited with her oppressiveness."

"Is she one of those people who make you feel you must friend or die?" Lorimer asked, with interest.

Margaret shook her head.

"No," she answered; "I'm constantly afraid of say-

ing something that will rouse her disapproval afresh. I don't expect you can understand how I feel—so resentful, that with her mean nature she should set up as a censor. I wouldn't mind if I could believe in her sincerity."

Locritus nodded slowly.

"What d'you think of my father?" he asked. "Curious chap, isn't he?"

"I like him very much," Margaret said hesitatingly. "I wish he didn't look at me in such a strange way."

"Perhaps he's seen you before—or wants to impress your face on his memory," said Locritus lightly.

"It may be so." Margaret granted the possibility and said no more of it. When they reached the home of the Lockerys her curiosity regarding the mother of her two friends was set at rest, for Mrs. Lockery was there, and entertained her for a few minutes. Margaret saw enough to explain a certain tiredness in Mr. Lockery's eyes—or so she thought; and was on the other side impelled to wonder why Mrs. Lockery was driven to dissatisfaction. That neither party was happy she was sure; and she wondered afterwards to hear Fanny chirruping dainty little old-fashioned songs of happiness to the accompaniment of Locritus on the old pleasant-toned piano. Her wonder was increased when Locritus played Mozart still on the old piano, and seemed to her to bring out the dancing, rippling, exquisite music with the feeling of an enthusiast. She remembered Mozart's own love of dancing and understood afresh the appeal of his music to even the untutored ear.

"You have another talent I didn't suspect," she said.

"I will sing," said Locritus simply; and if Margaret had to laugh at the air of complacency with which he spoke she was not sorry to listen. The songs were almost as enjoyable as the playing, for although Locritus had neither a strong nor a very beautiful voice, his singing was not ill, and Margaret was in the humour to be pleased.

The contrast between her Saturday's pleasure and her Sunday's duty had been in Margaret's mind beforehand, and was, on the Sunday, even more disagreeably present. The duty was one whose execution had been long deferred—a call upon her cousins, the Mallows family, for the purpose of inquiring after Herbert. She had felt it impossible to go, and yet go she must, at last. And to leave it beyond this Sunday was to bring upon herself a further accumulation of foreboding and resentment, so she undertook the journey with all the unwillingness of a sacrificial victim.

"I ought to have come before," she said to Mrs. Mallows, vulgar and selfish. "I can't excuse myself; but since Jenny left I've not felt very bright."

The answer was as she expected, silence and a sour glance.

Presently, "Herbert's down to-day. Come into the front room."

They went, to find the object of their quest cleaning his pipe.

"Hullo, Mag," he said, without rising. "Saw you come. You might have come before."

Mrs. Mallows muttered something and went out of the room again. There was a pause, during which Margaret felt extremely awkward.

"Are you quite better now?" she asked, looking at his foot and the walking stick that lay against the table beside him.

"I'm very comfy at this moment," Mallows said, with a glance.

"It must have been a very miserable time for you," Margaret went on, ignoring speech and glance.

"You might have come and cheered me," Mallows suggested. "I should have been quite well by now if you had."

"I've been busy."

"Say unkind."

"Lazy, rather."

"Don't say indifferent," Mallows put in, with a look from beneath half-closed lids.

"How have you managed to kill time?" asked Margaret coldly, or as coldly as her indignation allowed.

"I had *some* visitors—kinder than you. And I thought of you."

"You fell downstairs, didn't you?"

Mallows winced; he could have desired a more heroic source of pain.

"Yes," he mumbled. "Didn't look where I was going. The mater called me—thinking about something else. It's over now."

"I was at the Lockerys' yesterday."

Mallows' eyes shot a sudden glance at her. His head jerked as though he was ticking off a point in his mind.

"I didn't know you knew 'em like that. Young Lockery's in your office, isn't he? I know him fairly well."

"It's the first time I've been," Margaret explained. "Mr. Lockery's at my office—yes."

"Old Lockery still at home?"

Margaret nodded without speaking. Then in a minute she added:

"I saw Mrs. Lockery too."

"She's a funny old girl."

Margaret would not discuss them, she thought.

Mallows was busily occupied with certain thoughts; he looked at Margaret all the time, never removing his gaze from her face.

"Do you know the girl—Fanny?"

"Yes."

"Quiet little thing," pursued Mallows. "The father—I've never met him; what's he like?"

Margaret considered; she did not want to express opinions to her cousin.

"He's about fifty, I should think. He seemed very nice."

"Funny family—he's away most of the time, you know."

"So I understood."

"No reason given, I suppose?"

"I really didn't inquire," Margaret burst out, im-

mediately ashamed of her warmth. "They didn't say," she added.

"How's Jenny?" Mallows said.

"Getting on well; you know she's gone away."

Mallows looked at some artificial flowers on the mantelpiece.

"Poor little Jenny," he said, "I hope it'll do her good."

Margaret was very angry; it was with a great effort she stopped bitter words that sprang ready to her tongue. She smothered them. "How I hate him!" she whispered to herself.

"She's with good people?" Mallows inquired in an idle way.

"Yes; it's a sort of convalescent home."

He nodded several times, and Margaret attributed this to his indifference to anything pertaining to Jenny, the Jenny he pitied.

"Have you known Fanny Lockery long?" asked Mallows abruptly.

"No; she came once to see Jenny."

Margaret wondered why he had asked her that; it had been such an obvious question. She thought he must be trying to make conversation. It was not necessary for her to stop longer.

"I only called to see how you were," Margaret said, rising. "I'll go and see Auntie now for a little."

"Don't go," Mallows begged. "You're cruel; you want to tantalize me by a glimpse."

"I don't know what you mean," Margaret cried angrily, and went to the door.

"You're unkind," said Mallows, to wheedle her.

"I'm going," Margaret answered, her hand outstretched behind her, feeling for the lock. He made a step forward and held the table.

"I say," he said, "you might feel sorry for a fellow who's been on his back for weeks."

"You use your illness to be rude," Margaret said incoherently, half out of the room.

"Don't!" shouted Mallows. "I say, Mag. Want to ask you something." She returned and stood in the doorway. "You must have needed money to send Jenny away," he went on.

Margaret flinched; she felt her teeth set firm.

"You didn't offer, you know," she sneered.

"I suppose you got it from young Lockery?" Mallows said slowly.

Margaret felt her heart beating, pounding, in her throat. She held the door handle tightly. It seemed as though her brain would not act, that she could not decide what to do—what to do!

"Did you?" Mallows persisted.

Margaret drew herself to her full height.

"No!" she lied on the impulse of the moment.

CHAPTER XII

DICKERS THE DIPLOMATIST

By the time that Robert Barlow had overcome the feelings aroused in him by the discovery of his mother's body Kitty was in the room, brought by fear at his cry. At a glance Kitty saw that something was seriously amiss.

"Oh, what is it?" she cried, her voice barely recognizable in its harshness. They both knelt for a moment beside the dead body, and Robert saw his sister's face was gray with agony. She looked at him strangely.

"Quite cold," she said miserably. "She's dead—she's dead!"

"I've just come up," muttered Robert. "I slept in the kitchen." He could not shake off his dread of implication, which assailed him with heavy suddenness.

"She was all right—I left her quite well," Kitty went on. Then, "Didn't you hear anything, Bob?"

"A thud as I came in," he made answer hurriedly. "Never dreamt anything could be wrong. I wasn't even sure there was a sound. It was when I came in I thought to myself, 'Funny'; but I just went in and had a bit of supper. I fell asleep in the chair."

Of the two Kitty felt the shock the more, because, although she had borne impatiently her mother's invariable preference for Robert, she had known her better than any other person—affection, if affection there were, had been quite mechanical, it is true—the very drudgery of attachment; but, after all, this dead thing was her mother and to be mourned. With Robert, on the other hand, the loss was small: he had been careless of his mother all his life, had thrown her a rough word as one throws a biscuit to a dog, and had abused her in equally indifferent fashion. She had been for the most part an object of ridicule, with her slowness, her failure to understand quickly, her decayed faculties; he had looked upon her as a part of the household, one who always rose to his mood and aped it as well as she could but was otherwise negligible. He had been startled, torn by the suddenness of the event and the discovery; his unmanning had drawn its origin from his unrestful sleep and the melancholy awakening in the gray morning. After all, too, she was his mother: something had stirred him to pain for an instant. In a week he was free of the memory, not especially callous, simply accepting her sudden death with the recognition that such things did occur every day and everywhere.

During the days that followed Kitty was pale and sad; she turned from contemplation of death to the spectacle of current needs. Should she give up her work, her comparative independence, in order to keep house for Robert? Was that the only thing to be done? More or less, she felt it was forced upon her, that she had no

alternative; and yet in her heart she rebelled against the prospect as intolerable. It meant giving up the reliefs of her daily duties and becoming as much apart from the world as a nun could be, relinquishing her chosen conversations of the daytime, her trivial excursions of pleasure, all she had found to give a point to her existence. Against that she placed the knowledge that the uncertainty of employment would be removed. Would it be removed? Was it not likely that Robert would marry and she be turned adrift? Was she certain that the arrangement would last, supposing she gave up her independence? Honestly, she had fears, in whichever direction she turned. Robert was unstable—as water; her present work, hard though it was, brought her, with extras, enough to live upon, and it brought her into contact with other people. And—she deprecated the introduction of the sporting element, but it plagued her —there had been many waitresses at the Tarratonga who had married their patrons, some of them not so pretty as herself. In contemplation of this idea Kitty blushed painfully; it had fascinations that strove against the discomforts. If she stayed at home her colour might go and wrinkles come, and she still unmarried. She was not desirous of living and dying a maid; to keep house for Robert had its dull colours in greater strength than those lighter shades which spoke of clear afternoons, free from worries and cries of "Miss!" that she so resented in strangers. She stayed at home until the funeral, debating in odd moments the two possibilities. Robert seemed to give no thought to the matter, seemed

to take it for granted that she would drudge with a will at his call.

For his part Robert sought relief elsewhere and went out early to return late—once the difficulties connected with the burial were set at rest. He found his cronies and forgot his affairs in the pleasant pointless chat of the bar, over innumerable glasses. He made no attempt to comfort Kitty: that was out of his province, for they scarcely saw each other when Mrs. Barlow was alive, and his recollection of a pointed tongue was not one upon which Robert cared to dwell. He was not unhappy now; had even, on the morning of the funeral, blamed his sister for overcooked eggs at breakfast.

It happened that in one of his favourite haunts he ran across Dickers, fully convalescent. Dickers remembered the place as being one Robert had mentioned when they met, and, as he was dull, had wondered whether his pugilistic acquaintance might not provide some interesting entertainment, should he be so fortunate as to encounter him. The meeting gave mutual satisfaction.

"Hello, Jones," Barlow said to him upon entry.

"Thought I might see you," Dickers told him artlessly.

"What you going to have?"

The business was compromised, as Dickers was already engaged and was abstemious. Barlow "liquored up," as he explained.

"What you been doin' since I saw you?" he asked. "Workin'?"

"Oh, yes," Dickers assured him. "Hard. Been ill, too. Laid up for a week."

"What's your line?" inquired Barlow, apparently forgetting the terms of their earlier encounter.

"Insurance—figures," Dickers said proudly. He *was* sure of his figures. He remembered, too, that all his anxieties lest some mistake should be discovered during his absence had been unnecessary, for his work had been found in perfect order. Indeed, his absence had been felt, and he fancied that his position had been improved somewhat by a discovery of fresh merits.

Barlow nodded. Figures in the abstract had no interest for him; immediate profit and loss was in his eyes the great business of life. So he found it.

"Doing any more walks?" he asked.

"Bit. I did twenty miles last Sunday."

"What's been the matter with you?"

"Influenza—nasty thing; pulls you down so."

"Feller I know's been laid up for weeks—don't seem to get better. Nice chap, he is—in his way, you know. Laying on his back all the time, he's been. He says to me, 'Bob,' he says, 'this is awful,' he says. 'I'd give ten quid —a hundred quid—to have my legs back,' he says."

"Oh!" said Dickers, much interested. "Had 'em off, has he?"

Barlow burst out laughing.

"Not as bad as that," he corrected. "No; broke one of them. Like a fool he fell downstairs. Never do that, Jones."

Dickers gave a great start. He drank some beer in an elaborate and bovine tactfulness.

"Nasty thing," he said, "especially if he has to get about."

He trailed the bait under Mr. Barlow's nose.

"No; it don't matter to him. Feller named Mallows; private income, you know. Irons in the fire. Son of the fellow in the broking line."

"That's a great help—somebody to back you up," Dickers said, not knowing how else to turn the matter off.

So it was Mallows of whom Barlow had spoken. Dickers chuckled and wondered what the connection might be. He noticed Barlow looking at him in a strange way and finished his glass of beer. The refill was ordered by his acquaintance, and both sat down at one of the small tables near the wall. A hum of conversation was all around them, and the ring of the cash register and the constant wheeze and dump of the pump handles at the bar. A man came in with boot laces, and everybody grew absorbed in conversation; he offered the laces miserably to Dickers, who gave him a penny.

"Drop o' Scotch, Rosie, old dear," suggested a newcomer, throwing down a coin that rang sharply.

"I suppose," Barlow said awkwardly, "yours is a money-makin' lay?"

Dickers replied cautiously that it was hardly that, and Barlow nodded. He had apparently not wanted to borrow. A man caught his arm and drew him aside. Dickers watched them aimlessly and witnessed what seemed to be an animated dialogue. The man went away, and Barlow came back.

"One of my pals," he said, jerking his head. "Wants me to do a little thing for him. Oh, I do a bit now and then."

"Have to be careful, eh?" Dickers asked.

Barlow winked expressively.

"I *don't* think," he said. "There's a little job I'm on now—I don't know if it's in your line. A little dodge—quite simple."

Now Thomas Dickers had been brought up carefully by his widowed mother with a small income in her own right; he had never yet done an unclean or a dishonest thing. Yet something of an English spirit of adventure tempted him; he thought the story would be a good one to retail to Locritus at some time.

"Money in it?" he asked.

"As clear as day," Barlow assured him, thinking that he bit. "There's pots. Only point is, we want to do the thing in different ways—some by advertisement, direct canvass—so on. I knew you was a man, Jones—soon as I saw you. Pair of shoulders like that, you know. By the way, what *is* your name?"

"Thomas," Dickers said promptly.

"Thomas Thomas?"

"John—Thomas will do."

"Jones is a better name; they're both Welsh. Are you Welsh?"

Dickers demurred.

"Hardly," he objected. "Perhaps long ago."

"Well, d'you feel like it?" Barlow asked, a good-tempered, sunny smile upon his florid face, but a search-

ing look in the eyes. He had been honest and was now afraid.

"Did you ever know anybody refuse money?" Dickers asked him.

Barlow nodded, doubts at rest.

"You're right," he said, and became more expansive. After hinting at the nature of the scheme, and opening Dickers's eyes a little, he concluded. "Well, I'll talk things over with my partner," he said. "See you again here? Say Thursday, same time?"

Dickers promised, and left Barlow sitting there with his whisky. As he came out into the Strand, in the bilious light of the lamps, seeing the ever-hurrying throng of people with their staring eyes, Dickers chuckled to himself again. Something Locritus was fond of saying came into his mind, and he repeated it with emphasis.

"Lord, what fools these mortals be!" he said.

Then he walked toward Holborn, up Aldwych and Kingsway, still thinking of Barlow and his precious scheme.

"Won't young Charley Lockery shout!" he chuckled gleefully. "I wonder if the partner's Mallows? He's quite fit for it. Now, shall I play Brer Rabbit—and splosh the whole thing?"

As a rule Margaret Marsden walked from the office up the Strand and to Charing Cross, where she took an omnibus, which left her a few minutes to walk at the other end. On the same evening that Dickers encountered Robert Barlow she had left the office as usual and

was walking up Fleet Street when somebody called her name, and Mr. Frederick, the elder son of the head of her firm, came up behind.

"Are you just going home?" he asked her.

Margaret replied that she was.

"I'm lucky," said Mr. Frederick. She wondered how. "I'm going part of your way," he added, smiling down at her.

Margaret could not help walking a little faster. "If," she thought, "he's coming my way, the sooner it's over the better."

"You don't mind, I suppose?" supplemented Mr. Frederick.

"If you don't think it an indignity," she said. She could hardly say his company was an infliction, Margaret thought.

"D'you always come this way?" pursued Mr. Frederick.

"Generally."

"Beastly lot of people—can't hear yourself talk. I should have thought you'd ride. You wouldn't care to?"

"No, thanks; but don't let me prevent you from riding."

"And you walk? No!"

They threaded their way as quickly as Margaret could go; but the crowd that jostled was each moment more dense, for many people had poured into the main thoroughfare from offices about the Strand.

"'Fraid you have rather a rough time at the office, Miss Marsden," put in Mr. Frederick. "No? I told

young Bertie he was too keen on letting Miss Dilkes off —he's a young fool, you know."

What her companion meant, Margaret saw with comparative clearness, but himself in the light of a mediator she could not imagine.

"That was very kind of you," she said drily. "But really, as you see, I get away quite early. The work's by no means hard."

He seemed disappointed, she thought.

"I told him he mustn't overwork you," he explained. "He's so enthusiastic about the office—can't understand him. Doesn't seem to see that girls can't keep it up as men can."

"I don't know that some of them would thank you for calling them weaklings," Margaret said.

"Oh, I don't mean those great hulking women; but little delicate things like you." He looked again, unrewarded. "You're not a Suffragist, are you, Miss Marsden?" he asked suddenly, as though a fear had struck him.

"Politics are beyond me altogether," Margaret told him. "But I do think women might have the vote without losing their heads."

"Oh, but, I say, look at these shriekers. They ought not to have it, you know. Too warm for anything, eh?"

"Well!" Margaret seemed to admit the truth, rather as a means of keeping him quiet than anything else.

"So ridiculous as they are," Mr. Frederick commented.

"That's my 'bus. So, good-night."

"No, you don't, Miss Marsden," he said quickly. "I'm going part of the way to Chelsea myself. So if you don't mind . . . Sure you don't mind?"

Margaret sighed and smiled to show that she could hardly object. He paid her fare and talked upon various subjects—the office, plays, novels—novels he sneered at. "Women's things," he called them contemptuously.

"But delicate women?" suggested Margaret, in recollection of a previous remark. He did not seem to understand her. "You seemed to think that women had a fair share of brain," she said, as he begged for her meaning.

"Oh—I didn't mean . . . of course . . . I only meant I've no time for reading myself. I hate the womanish in men. Let women be women, and men men; that's rational enough, Miss Marsden. Oh, I'm not too hard; I see there's good in some books—Carlyle and Tupper, you know, people who've got something to say. It's these wom—— By the way, have you seen *The Rose of Drell?* That's a pretty play. Costume—don't know what century. Wigs, you know. Yes, very good; you shouldn't miss that. Well, this is where I get off. Goodnight, Miss Marsden. See you in the morning."

He shook hands and raised his hat, then scrambled down the steps of the omnibus, nearly precipitating the conductor into the road. On the whole he was not dissatisfied. The Marsden girl was not bad fun; she was brighter, he supposed, when you knew her. Little shy, perhaps. But what eyes, and cheeks, and mouth. Mr. Frederick was really well pleased. If he had as yet said nothing about her overwork to his brother there was

still time to rectify the omission; he would tell that ass Bertie to-morrow that he must leave off playing the fool with Miss Dilkes.

Mr. Frederick was, as has been said already, one of those pseudo-gallants, of whom there are many in London. Having the certainty of money he was in no quandary as to earning his living, and when he had done his regulation amount of work at the office he spent the remainder of his time philandering or in company with others of similar tastes and less cash. For all his endeavours his purse was his first thought, and he had good looks to support a freedom of spending. He had thus many acquaintances, who called him "old love" and insinuated their fingers into his pocket as far as he permitted. As, however, Mr. Frederick had some of the acuteness out of which his father had built a thriving business, he generally managed to check these inquiring fingers at the first joint, too early to permit of any success in the search; and he kept his head cool.

His feminine acquaintance was as various as it was large; and it was of such a nature that in every case it produced nothing but boredom. With the true stuff of existence he had no connection; none of his friends was anything but an inferior type—all of them tried to seem either very bad or very good, and as they were invariably unsuccessful in acting the part they remained mediocre. To Mr. Frederick, therefore, Margaret was a change; he supposed her to have at heart a nature similar to that universal nature he thought he knew; he imagined that it was only a matter of time and a few kindnesses

before he should number her among his intimate friends. He smiled pleasantly at a remembrance of her that crossed his mind, and kissed his hand to the air, as he had heard of Bohemians doing.

"The sweetest little girl," he said, as though he were toasting her.

For her part Margaret had thought of him with puzzled eyes as she completed her omnibus journey.

"What *is* he like?" she asked herself. "There's something in him of Herbert: that flamboyant air—so jaunty and assured; but he always seems a little uncomfortable, as though he were brazening it out."

They neared the destination; the horses perked up their heads and trotted along faster, without any invitation from the driver. After the ting of the bell they restarted with painful scraping and scraggling of hoofs upon the roadway.

"I hope he won't come this way again," Margaret said, and dismissed Mr. Frederick from her thoughts. "I wonder if there's a letter to-day from Jenny? Sure to be, I should think. . . ."

CHAPTER XIII

LOCRITUS AS COUNSELLOR

To LUNCHEON Locritus betook himself with perennial anticipation. No matter how tired he might be, even on Mondays, whatever his health, there was always happy curiosity about the menu that overcame all other feelings. Tea, he admitted, was the best meal, on Saturdays and Sundays, when he had it with Fanny; but during the week, lunch was the time for greatest enjoyment. With Dickers he understood breakfast was the favourite meal, but as he pointed out, to his friend's discomfort, one does not take roly-poly at breakfast. Ergo, breakfast is but the pale shadow of a meal.

Kitty was in the smoking room this morning, after an absence of several days. He had heard of the reason from one of the other girls and thought he would do nothing to awaken painful thoughts. She came to him at once.

"Did you miss me?" she asked, her cheeks a little flushed; "I've been away four days."

"I'm so sorry," Locritus said. "You're better back, perhaps."

"I was mopey away. I'm glad to be back, in a way."

Tinkle-tinkle went somebody's knife on a glass. Kitty

had perforce to hurry away. She returned a few minutes later with plates.

"Shall you be coming here to tea?" she asked Locritus as she laid his knife and fork and handed the cruet from another table.

"I hadn't intended . . . why?" he asked in return.

"Don't come specially. I wanted to speak to you [Cries of "Miss!"] Only if you can quite easily. I want ["Miss, how long are you going to keep me?"] to ask your advice. It's important to me."

Locritus nodded, and Kitty went off to appease the hungry neighbours. Comparative satisfaction was given to all parties.

When he returned to the office Locritus found Mr. Frederick talking to Margaret, who still wore her hat and jacket, evidently having come back from lunch early to finish some work. When Miss Dilkes returned Mr. Frederick, who found her too loquacious and brimming with vivacity, betook himself to his own room.

"Mr. Frederick overtook me last night and went partly home," Margaret told Locritus on the first opportunity.

Something thrilled in his veins, and he scowled at her.

"What did he do that for?" he asked.

"Presumably because he was going my way and wanted company. That's what I understood. It was rather awful."

"Must have been," Locritus grumbled irritably.

Margaret, seeing his mood, left him alone and went to her work again.

"Curses on Mr. Frederick's head! The impudent beast! What business has he to force his company where it isn't wanted? Like his infernal cheek! These chaps think bounce does everything. I s'pose Albert will be trying that game on soon—when he's sick of Dilkes." Locritus still talked to himself bearishly and kicked about under his desk, as he was in the habit of doing when he was angry or unwell. "Surely Margaret could look after herself," was the thought that made him irritable; "she did not need him to tell her which man was to be believed and which to be scorned." Locritus would by no means consider the point that amiability to an employer's son is policy; he condemned what people call "policy" with all his might, just as he condemned everything else that seemed flagrantly dishonest. Dickers said it was "common sense" to toady to your employer, whereupon Locritus made an epigram, striking an attitude to do it justice. "Common sense," he said, "is the name given by each man to the sum of his current thoughts: it has no authority." Dickers thought this might be nonsense and denounced it on the off-chance.

In the evening, after office hours, when the Tarratonga Tea Company's depot was but sparsely furnished with customers, Locritus went to drink tea in the smoking room. Kitty laid before him her difficulty.

"If I keep house for Bob," she said, "I give up everything."

"Does he benefit?" asked Locritus shrewdly.

She hesitated at that and turned the matter in her mind, standing before him with her hands upon the

back of a chair. Her face was still rather white, but the small cap sat coquettishly upon her hair, and her eyes seemed deep within the surrounding lashes.

"I don't see that he does—he's generally out during the day. His movements—he says so—are uncertain. I never know but what he might bring home some other girl and turn me out."

"Is he a marrying man?"

"Well, he's got a nice face—and a jolly way with his friends. Some girls might like him. I s'pose he's all right in his way," she said dubiously.

"You're not enthusiastic, are you?" Locritus suggested slyly.

"Would you be? You heard him that night we went to Earl's Court." Kitty's colour deepened. "Could I admire a brother when I suspect him? Could you?"

"Wouldn't it give you time to yourself?" Locritus asked.

"To do what?"

That floored him, she could see. He had not much idea of what women did during the day. He supposed they swept, and in the afternoon sewed, or read, or occupied themselves in some genteel way which he could only admire at a distance. He could not imagine Kitty doing anything that was merely genteel; he thought she was active and would work hard as long as any work had to be done. After that he was at a loss to make any suggestion. Accordingly he shook his head slowly and gravely. He could think of no appropriate remark.

Kitty was called away for a moment, but she returned.

"Seems to me," Locritus said, "that you only want me to confirm your view that it's best to do as you are doing now and get somebody in to look after your brother." He looked at her cunningly as he spoke.

Kitty replied pointedly.

"I do," she admitted—"or I did, supposing you couldn't think of some reason why I ought to stop with him. I'd get his breakfast, and get somebody to clean, and he'd have his dinner and tea out, as he generally does. That's best, it seems to me. Thank you very much. I felt I wanted to ask somebody I knew; I hope you haven't been troubled."

"I only wish," Locritus said, "that I could have helped you really; as it is, you seem to have thought of everything. I *can* only agree with you."

He finished his tea under the watchful eye of the manageress, whose grim presence produced a strange hush in the smoking room. Men, guilty of nothing amiss, stirred uneasily behind their papers at eyes that seemed to pierce their souls. She smiled at Locritus as he went out, however, which he took as a good omen; and when she told him the weather had been fine he was certified that Kitty's lengthy communication would not get her into trouble.

When he arrived on the railway platform he found the noble form of Dickers already there, so they travelled together in a third-class smoking compartment containing fifteen people, each one of whom smoked a more distressful kind of tobacco than the others. The atmosphere was so bad that Locritus was obliged to puff hard

in order not to be overcome with the tobacco fumes that swam slowly around him. Under the circumstances, talk with Dickers was impossible, except the interchange of news items from their opposed newspapers, or comments on events past and future. At the junction, things were clearer, and they had only six companions for some distance. Between three stations they dropped all of these, and having the compartment to themselves, began to talk more confidentially than before. Dickers seated himself in the opposite corner of the carriage, put his legs along the seat, and puffed slowly.

"I want to talk to you seriously, Loc," he said. "D'you feel strong enough to listen? I'm in real earnest. No hank. And I don't want you to frivol."

"Valiant heart, I will try," Locritus assured him. "Fire away!"

"I'm now getting one-fifty-five. That's not bad. I shall be getting a rise at midsummer. I have some money put by—a good bit, and the mater's got enough to live on. Fanny's old enough now to know her own mind; she'll be twenty-one in three weeks. There's a house at thirty-two pounds a year in the Leverton Road—old Dobbs would do it up and let me have it at thirty. I've got enough to furnish it well; I'm nearly six-and-twenty. And—well, you know, I want to marry Fan."

He concluded gawkily, getting red and jerking the words out unsteadily as though some smoke had gone farther than it should have. He cleared his throat to heighten the illusion and put his pipe once again into his mouth, relighting it and holding the bowl. Locritus

was in a brown study, his eyes half closed, his hat over his eyes, and little spiral coils coming from the bowl of his pipe.

"What have I to advise?" he asked at length.

"Tell me—what I'm to do," Dickers said.

"But you've made up your mind. It's all cut and dried. When people ask my advice they always tell me what they're going to do and expect me to encourage 'em. This is no business of mine; it's all between you and Fanny. If you're sure enough of her, ask by all means. I'll wish you luck as fast as you like."

"That's not it, Charley. Is there any chance? It's because I'm not sure of Fanny I ask you. D'you think she'd look at me?" Dickers said humbly.

"Oh, my boy!" Locritus said. The point was too fine.

"You advised me not to say anything—said she was a child. That's why I didn't ask—it's such a risk. I should lose you both."

"Nonsense! I've cursed myself for a busybody in saying that. It's no affair of mine; Fan's a jolly nice girl—good enough for anybody. It doesn't seem to me that you lose anything by asking. You've known us so long."

Dickers was silent for the rest of the journey, and they reached the home station in a few minutes.

"I don't know—I don't know," said the miserable Dickers to himself. They walked along to the Lockerys' house and stood outside for a moment.

"You'd better come in and see my father," Locritus said.

Dickers shook his head violently from side to side in refusal.

"Well, Fanny, then," Locritus urged.

They accordingly entered together. When they went into the sitting room Fanny was at the tea table, and seated in a chair by the fire was Herbert Mallows. He was in the midst of a lively story, to which Fanny was listening with round eyes of delight, her lips slightly parted and her pretty hands clasped. Mallows left off upon their entry and apologized for not rising. His leg, he said, was still out of proper working order, and he did not care to move it more than was absolutely necessary. He greeted Dickers cordially, remarking that they had not met for a long time. Dickers answered, gruffly enough, that he was sorry to hear of Mallows's illness, and talked intelligently about his own. They compared notes as to the horrors of a bedridden existence. Fanny ran and fetched an extra plate and cup and saucer for Dickers and laid a place for him. She nodded and smiled at Dickers—how he would have hailed any sign of confusion—in the process and asked after his mother.

"You've not been to see us for a long time," she said. "Did your mother tell you I came once to ask after you?"

"It was very good," Dickers told her warmly, leaning forward and rubbing his hands together between his knees.

"Cake?" asked Fanny innocently.

"Child! Bread and butter first, at any rate," Locritus said. "I expect you'd really like something to eat?" he added, turning to Dickers.

"I never have anything in the evening," Dickers explained. "It's such a trouble to my mother to cook anything now. She finds it hard to get about."

"Ah, when I was laid up," Mallows said, "I had to . . ."

Dickers was so much enraged at Fanny's eager expression that he did not hear the story. Locritus looked at him with a solemn face and twinkling eyes.

"Tea all right?" he asked warmingly. "Shout if it isn't."

"Be quiet! It's just as he likes it," Fanny expostulated.

"It is—it is!" Dickers cried, humbled and excited simultaneously by the new anxiety that beset him.

How to keep his head was now a matter of desperate importance. Was she beginning to fall in love with Mallows? Damn the man! What a devil's face he had to ensnare feminine eyes; what wiles were there to enchant this exquisite daughter—Dickers grew lyrical in his enthusiasm, and remembered with pride his own patriotic feeling—this exquisite daughter of England! And the man sitting there, Mallows, with the face of a gallant and the soul of a weasel, with a walking stick beside him to support the ailing limb—why, a man like that should be destroyed as a merciful deliverance! At the very moment he knew—nay, did he know?—well, no matter, he guessed this man to be a rascal, one whose presence in a pure house, talking to a pure-minded girl, was an affront, to be cleared only by summary justice. The palms Dickers held beneath the table tingled to be

clenched, the knuckles he rubbed upon his knees glowed for the assault. And he must clutch his fiery—yes, his English spirit—clutch it and batten it below hatches, all because this man, this pettifogging cheater of poor people, was not in possession of his full strength! How Dickers loathed English fair play at this moment! He found his teeth grinding softly to the rhythm of "All's fair"; he swayed in his chair, slowly, rhythmically, to a chant of "Love and War." His head was prickly with excitement, and his hair might at any moment stand on end. This scamp, this vermin! He looked suddenly at Mallows with fire in his eyes and half rose to his feet. Locritus kicked his leg, and he saw his friend was laughing. Mallows continued to jabber; what was he talking about? Fool! If one would talk so to be well in with a girl, to what depths was it not possible to sink!

"Palpably insincere," Dickers muttered to himself. "Why doesn't she see it?" Unknown to himself, he said the last words aloud, although below his breath.

Fanny sprang to the table.

"More tea?" she asked.

"I——" Dickers began; "just a little more, then."

In the return of the cup his hand touched her fingers. He remembered it with savage joy. After all, Mallows was obvious carrion. No girl in her senses could think of a man with unclean fleeting eyes, as Mallows had, that forever peeped and drifted and never looked firm and square—as an Englishman's eyes looked.

"Where's Mother?" asked Locritus.

"Study," Fanny told him. "Father's out; gone to the

city, I think, but he didn't say, nor when he'd be back."

"Do you want to talk business?" Locritus asked Mallows. "Could you come up one flight to my room?"

Mallows rose, and with the help of his stick—he disdained an arm—he walked slowly upstairs with Locritus, leaving Dickers standing on the hearthrug, hands in pockets, in the attitude of a master, with the mind of a slave. Fanny sat on a chair between himself and the table.

"You're sure you've had enough?" she said earnestly.

"Do I generally eat so much?" he asked.

She put her head on one side and surveyed him. It was an attitude only half conscious and quite five sixths devoid of artifice.

"I should think you had a healthy appetite," she said; "not normal. But look how much there is of you."

"You don't mean fat?" he pleaded—"not fat?"

"I suppose it's muscle," she said. "You are big—and brave too."

"Ah, you can't tell that," he answered, shaking his head.

But she would have it, reminding him of a time when he had kept his head and saved Locritus from a dashing dogcart.

"He'll never forget it," she exclaimed, "nor shall I. Think how terrible it would have been." She shut her eyes in horror at the picture.

"You've too much imagination," Dickers said. "He wasn't as near as all that. Besides, he's exaggerated in

telling you—evidently. Anyway, I hope I'm English; that's all I hope. I want to be worthy."

"You're more patriotic than we are," Fanny said. "Charley says Englishmen have no sense of humour whatever."

"Pooh!" said Dickers strenuously. "No humour! He tells me I've none. I can see a joke fast enough when it's clear. Besides, look at all the humorists who've written books. Where did they get their humour? It's English."

"Charley says they were mostly Irishmen or Scotchmen," Fanny said gently.

"D'you believe all he says?" questioned Dickers abruptly.

"I've no one else to tell me things," Fanny answered. And as his hands flew out of his pockets toward her she started to clear the table, singing to herself as she did so.

"Don't you think Mr. Mallows very handsome?" she asked.

Dickers ground his teeth and plunged his hands once again into his pockets, where they remained for a time.

"Oh, yes," he groaned; "I suppose he is. Rather effeminate, isn't he?"

"I don't think men can be very good judges of looks," Fanny said. "Charley doesn't seem to think Mr. Mallows handsome. Of course he likes him very much."

"I think men know beauty when they see it—prettiness, I mean," he added, correcting the remark so that it carried a closer personal significance. "Don't you think that?"

Fanny lifted the tray, which he hastened to take from

her, and by the time he had returned from the kitchen, the subject had flickered out. He stood there, looking at the fire, while Fanny closed the door and sat down in a comfortable chair.

"You're twenty-one in three weeks, aren't you?" Dickers said awkwardly, the very sense of approach to the vital subject making his heart leap and his ears tingle anew with dread and misery anticipated.

"Rather!" Fanny exclaimed, settling herself more comfortably. "Do sit down—unless you really prefer standing. I think it's so nice talking when you're by the fire. Let's be comfortable. That's better: I like to see you sitting there."

"Do you?" Dickers asked eagerly.

"Or Charley. You see, I don't know anybody else—except Margaret. Did you ever meet Miss Marsden at Charley's office?"

"Phew!" Dickers whistled in amazement. "No; I've never met her. Is she very nice? And pretty? Charley's mentioned her once or twice to me."

"She's fine. So pretty and sweet. Why did you whistle?"

Dickers looked at her somewhat embarrassed. He did not know how to explain away his indiscreet expression of surprise.

"Did I whistle?" he asked. She assured him that he had done so. "It must have been—the effort of recollection, you know," Dickers said. "He's not thinking of getting married, is he?" The artful Dickers was guilty here of base introductory strategy.

Fanny looked at him, awe-struck.

"It never occurred to me!" she said. "Oh, no; but she's awfully nice. . . . I wonder? Wouldn't it be funny! But I should be very lonely; I don't know whatever I should do if he did."

"No, you wouldn't," spluttered Dickers, incoherent with all his accumulated passions; "you'd marry—you'll marry yourself. I——"

Clump! clump! clump! sounded a stick on the stairs. Mallows and Locritus were evidently coming down again. Dickers flushed a dark red and poked the fire loudly to conceal his emotion. Fanny turned her face to the door, a crimson cushion behind her head framing a face as charming as any Mallows had ever seen.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MALLOWS FINANCES

The Mallows family, consisting only of father, mother, and son, was one of those close communities about which little or nothing is known by those with whom they come in contact. Mr. Mallows had made money on the Stock Exchange, and although he had now an income more than sufficient to live upon, he had been only moderately successful. Mrs. Mallows had gone through life in a purblind way, seeing the pavement immediately in front of her, but none of the temptations bordering her path, and losing in her progress any feeling of loving-kindness that her parents might have bequeathed. As a pair they made fit relatives of Herbert Mallows, who was, by their influence and his own natural bent, early interested in besting his associates. At school, when very young, he had become a "marble king," because, although possessed of no skill in marble playing, he made a commercial arrangement with the best marble player in his class, who had no money to set up for himself, by which the other boy was to be supplied with marbles from the pocket of Herbert Mallows, giving two thirds of his winnings to his backer.

Later, Mallows had entered upon commercial life with zest, had early discovered means of cooking his stamp-book accounts, and speedily arrived at an understanding of baser mankind. His failure—of which he was unfortunately ignorant in the natural course of events—was that he had no humour, no imagination, and no courage. It may be urged that humour and imagination are synonymous terms, in which case his deficiencies must be reduced to the number of two, unless we introduce the rather tawdry observation that Mallows could see neither nobility nor cleverness in his fellows. He thought every man had his commercial value and price, and he could not conceive the idea that any person had sufficient brain to find him out. As though nature had been careful to foster these mistaken notions, she had led him to desire and to find the company of those whose brains were slow, but whose natural tendencies were below the common standard of morality.

Mallows loved money, but he did not greatly care for risk. His present scheme for infringing patents was the biggest thing he had ever taken. If only his courage could last he seemed likely to realize profits to a considerable amount; but already his illness had made him acutely aware of the danger he ran—even if he kept himself as far as possible from active participation in the carrying out of his designs. Robert Barlow was, he knew, a valuable auxiliary, and he thought him capable of getting together a few men whose anxiety to live was enough to lead them deeper into the mire. After all,

although he knew any enterprising shopkeeper who would jump to a conclusion might immediately put a stop to his plans, Mallows felt confident that shopkeepers were mostly thieves who would make money dishonestly if in that way they could obtain larger and quicker profits. Mallows did not believe in the honest man: he had never met him. Accordingly his plans were laid on the assumption that the honest man was a myth, perpetuated by the sneaking deceit of a large body of hymn-singing Protestants. That was the way with the "unco guid": they made believe a lot, but that was their lay. It was obvious to anyone with common sense (Mallows applied the phrase to his own mental power) that human nature was what it was, would never be any different, and might accordingly be reckoned with at a much depreciated value.

It was a very easy thing for Fitton to make the things which sold under good names, and to make them, moreover, at a low price. With half a dozen men getting orders in the smaller towns (that was the thing, Mallows told himself—small towns where people had to struggle against one or two keen rivals and where they would not know much of business), ground could be covered very fast. He would be able to keep in touch with the trade and see whether the patent owners got wind of his scheme. Then, if all went well, things could be done on a larger scale altogether: they could travel the Midlands in the same way. The question was (he grew hot and cold with the fear and felt the perspiration start out all over his head)—the question was

whether the men would stick to him, whether they might not turn frightened and bring the police upon his track. It was frightfully dangerous . . . if he should be implicated in any way. . . . Barlow was safe —safe as houses. Barlow knew a man who would go through with a thing, and could tell whether there was the faintest risk of confession or backsliding. He would have to keep a sharp eye on the men: he would impress upon Barlow over and over again the need for absolute assurance of the men's—integrity. Oh, it would be safe enough: participation in the profits would keep the men loyal; participation in the scheme would keep them secret and humble against discovery. . . .

Mallows had mean ideas even of rascality; but there were other irons in his fire. He found it possible to be quite busy in the daytime, with his various interests. Of these, Barlow knew little, because Mallows was sly in his most expansive moods and kept those things from Barlow which he thought it would be risky to impart to a colleague—however trusted that colleague might be in other matters. Only Mallows and his father knew that Margaret Marsden was entitled to an income of one pound per week: the younger man discovered it in the course of some private examinations of his father's papers, and he had been forced—he said reluctantly—to use the information as a lever on a subsequent occasion, when his father had seemed restive under some more than usually flagrant attempt to extort money. The point, in comparison with some others of which he knew, was a small one; the money, as Herbert said,

barely worth having; yet an explanation of the valuable conserving spirit is extremely tedious.

"It's so difficult to explain," Herbert said, his eyes upon his father's face for an instant in their flight.

"Not when you're so glib," his father sneered, looking at him with an unparental expression in his eyes and round his mouth.

"Ah, but I'm not implicated, Father; you must remember that," Mallows explained. "I shouldn't have thought the thing good enough—from your point of view."

"Girl's making a living for herself—she'll get something when I go."

"What for?" asked Herbert, with a gasp. "Why?"

"It's hers," said his father, almost apologetically.

"If it was worth anything . . ." Mallows mused.

"She wouldn't marry *you*," his father told him, reading the idea behind the words. "There's no fear of that."

"If you think I should marry for a pound a week," Mallows exclaimed, "you're mistaken! Good looks or not, she's not worth it!"

"She's a good girl."

"Ah—I don't look at things that way. If you're so sentimental, I wonder at—this little—business."

"That's nothing to do with you," Mr. Mallows cried fiercely.

"No, but wouldn't Mag be glad to have a go at you, eh?"

He could imagine Margaret Marsden squabbling over

money; he thought she might be squared in a case of absolute need, which he trusted might never arise.

Presently Mr. Mallows gave in to his son's demand, and his son received a check for £100, which he ultimately handed over to his friend Barlow. Mr. Mallows was one of those men who are constantly doing dishonest things by the failure of their willpower: he was not unscrupulous, but his hands were rather soiled with the various things they had touched and held. Nevertheless, he was glad that in this instance he had prospered. His son had discovered, truly, that Margaret should have had fifty-two pounds per annum for the last seven years, but he had not discovered certain other things connected with the Mallows-Marsden financial arrangements which were also written plain for any man to read. That Margaret should be an heiress was out of the question; but that she might have lived without undue exertion was indubitable. In addition to the fifty-two pounds annually, Mr. Mallows had minded for her some other sources of income—namely, three houses producing together a yearly rental of ninety-six pounds, less expense of repairs; one small tract of land in Huntingdonshire bringing a few more pounds to the Mallows exchequer; and a cottage in the neighbourhood of Lyme Regis, rented by an artist for eighteen pounds a year. All told, about £160 per annum was due to Margaret, all of which had been impounded by her guardian, in such a way that Margaret had not suspected him to be more than a very surly, disobliging, and miserly old man.

When Mallows handed the check for £100 to Robert

Barlow he winked faintly. Barlow replied with a great slapping wink that screwed one side of his face into a ball, while the other side remained normal except for a startled left optic.

"Good," said Robert Barlow; "I like it."

"Sooner you use it the better," Mallows advised him. "Get it in gold."

"No notes for me," Barlow rejoined. "I like the jingle too much. Tell you what, though: I've got a new mate that I think'll do just right. Clerk, he is. Fine figure of a man too. Mind you, no nonsense about him. Met him out of town once—one time I was walkin'. . . . Oh, quite straight! Yes, I said to him, 'Makin' pots o' money?' I said. He looks at me. 'Oh,' I said, 'much as you care, I suppose.' I was very careful, you see. 'Well,' he said, 'depends upon what you've got to offer.' "

Robert Barlow paused, and Mallows nodded approvingly during the impressive silence that followed.

"So—I *said:* 'Supposing I've nothing to offer?' 'Well,' he said, 'if that's the case, you're not the man I thought,' he said. So I looks at him. That did it. We talks things over a bit—on the Q. T. Oh, a very nice chap! No nonsense about him, like there was about Pipkins. . . . Snuffy little fellow Pipkins. Never could have been any good. My word, what a woman that is!"

Mr. Barlow always spoke rapturously of Mrs. Pipkins; he had never seen anybody who had so taken his fancy.

"The way that woman wore her rings!" he proceeded, with a clouded eye bent upon the horizon, where Mrs.

Pipkins sat in visionary evasiveness. "Wonderful! Used to lean on the bar . . . I've seen her many a time. Used to arrange his tie with her own hands across the bar . . . and them all flashing with jewellery. Diamonds!—course, they weren't real. But they *did* shine!"

"What's his name?" Mallows asked, to escape the rhapsody. But Mr. Robert Barlow, fairly started, had forgotten the name and preferred to celebrate Mrs. Pipkins.

"Calls him 'Pip'; says he gives her the 'ump. So I should think! Little fellow like that, you know! *She* seemed to like him. Women are funny in their choice of husbands—seem to look for a safe thing. I suppose he's earning his four pound a week. We gay dogs are all right for a bit of fun. . . . No; it's the little steady men they get as husbands. They tell me she gives him his fares every day. . . ."

"What's this fellow's name—that you talked about?"

"Eh?" said Barlow sharply. "Oh, Tompkins, or—no, Thomas. I call him Jones. He's the image of Jones—d'you remember him?"

"Never saw him," Mallows said. "Well, did you fix anything up with him? Settle anything?"

"No. I said I must see my boss; that I'd let him know then. He's the right stuff. I should think he's not afraid of anything. Powerful strong man too. Different to Pipkins. He always was a measly little rat, Pipkins. . . ."

Having made some necessary arrangements with Robert Barlow, Mallows said suddenly:

"By the way, I shall want to see you again on Friday evening. I'll look over at your place—you're all straight again now. I'll pay my respects to your sister. She all right?"

Mr. Barlow swore softly.

"Little cat!" he said. "If you'd slap her face . . ." he said slowly and vengefully. He did not feel kindly toward his sister at the moment.

"You'll have settled with Tompkins then. And seen about those other things?" Mallows inquired.

When Barlow nodded Mallows left him. There was no formal farewell between them. They parted to meet again, as it were, and ordinary civilities had long since been abandoned in their intercourse.

Mallows had a little private business that took him along the Strand farther east, and he subsequently returned home in a pleasanter mood than he had felt for many weeks. His eyes glowed, and in the train his hands rubbed together, not gleefully, but as though he was in thought. At home Mallows looked up *Willing's Press Guide,* which proved to contain the information he sought, although, owing to his ignorance of the precise details of what he wanted, the task was a longer one than he anticipated. Then, having accomplished his aim, he sat down and wrote two letters, one to the office of a provincial newspaper, the other to Charles Lockery.

DEAR LOCKERY [the latter ran]:

I wonder if you and your sister would care to come over here one evening and have some music? I would ask your friend

Margaret Marsden. My mother seconds the invitation and asks me to say how sorry she was not to have seen you when you came to see me while I was laid up. Shall we say next Tuesday?

Always very sincerely yours,
H. Mallows.

To which letter he received a reply in due course, written in the rapid and illegible hand of Locritus, brief and spasmodic.

Dear Mallows:

Sorry it can't be done. Our mother addresses a meeting next Tues., and we must go. Some other time perhaps. Greatly obliged by your mother's kind message; pray tell her the disappointment was mine. I enclose B. N. value £5. This makes fifteen still owing, I think?

Yours truly,
Ch. Lockery.

The letter gave Mallows no satisfaction; he had reckoned upon acceptance of the date he offered, and saw that by his reply Locritus had ignored the tacit hint that another day would do as well as the following Tuesday. And Locritus had ignored it wilfully. He had even thrown Mallows's letter into the fireplace with a snort.

"I dislike that fellow," he said. "I will *not* go to his house." And by his evasion he thought he had put the matter off with sufficient indefiniteness to excuse a later refusal.

The part of the letter which had more than anything else to do with the refusal was that too familiar allusion to Margaret Marsden. The suggestion was too blatant.

Locritus felt it an affront to Margaret—at least. Also he felt that even Margaret's company would not make up fully for the pain he would be certain to experience at being for a whole evening in the Mallowses' lair.

"To go there," he said, picking the condemned letter from the fireplace and tearing it into a hundred pieces, which he placed thoughtfully in Fanny's work basket—"to go there would be unendurable—no Lockery could stand it."

CHAPTER XV

THE CASE AGAINST PATIENT GRISSIL

Mr. Lockery held in his hand a flimsy piece of paper, and it seemed to Fanny that his face was white and drawn.

"Father," she cried, "what is it?"

In sympathy, her own face blanched, and her pretty eyes clouded with foreboding of illness that should make them all unhappy.

"I'm so sorry, dear," he told her, coming close, and patting her on the shoulder awkwardly; "but I can't stay for your birthday. . . . Perhaps I can get back. But someone—someone I've known all my life—is very ill, dying, and I must go to him. This telegram is to say he wants me at once."

Fanny's lower lip quivered for an instant: she had set her heart on the united celebration of her birthday. But she made her eyes look tranquilly back into his.

"Of course you must go," she said; "I expect you can come back in good time. I know you'll try; I've looked forward so to having you."

Her father smiled faintly and patted her shoulder again.

"Who knows?" he said. "I might be back in a week."

"You'll miss Mother's speech," Fanny said, awe-stricken.

"That too," admitted her father solemnly.

"I wouldn't miss it for worlds," Fanny confided. "All the really good people in her branch are going to be there. I shall be so excited."

"You'll try not to make a disturbance," pleaded Mr. Lockery.

"Don't be silly! You're like Charley. He says he's not going to sit with me because I shall say, ' 'Ray!' when Mother makes her points. You don't seem to remember I'm a grown woman!" Fanny grew almost indignant in her expostulation, and with each word receded from the appearance of the age she claimed.

With Locritus her experience had been and was similar. He had informed her many times that what made the world go round was humour, of which she had none. Further, that she would accept her mother's views as truth, however irrational. Questioned as to the source of his opinion, Locritus waved his hand at herself with a provoking air of assurance.

"One argues"—it always irritated Fanny if he called himself "one"—one argues," he repeated, for due effect, "from past behaviour, little things the observant eye notes before the person observed is herself aware of them."

"You're quite wrong," Fanny assured him triumphantly. "You don't understand me in the least. I don't think anybody does."

He looked at her sorrowfully and shook his head, half in earnest.

"Another of the misunderstood! My own sister a sealed book! Have I lived in a fool's paradise of seeming acquaintance for many years?"

Fanny nodded.

"You have," she said, "if you thought you knew any of the thoughts that agitated this brain!" She pointed at her forehead, in imitation of the comic spirit.

Locritus chuckled at her satisfaction.

"And none to say, 'Oh the pity of it!' " he quoted.

"What is a merry heart?" Fanny asked abruptly, to show her ease.

Locritus considered for a moment before replying; then he countered.

"What do you mean?" he asked in turn.

"Never you mind. Just tell me what you think it means."

"It'll take a long time. It's Shakespeare, you know."

"I know it's Shakespeare: it's in *The Winter's Tale,* which is an extremely interesting play, containing many characters drawn from the life," Fanny said primly, evidently referring to some textbook for children in which the play was mentioned.

Locritus gave her a quizzical look.

"It's this way," he said, trying not to be oracular. "Most people start out with immense ideas of the world —like yours, you know—and they think it's a great road. They talk about the highway of life. You've read

of idiotic people doing that? Thought so. Well, it isn't —at least it isn't for everybody. There's turnings and back alleys and so on. Well, people think they'll fly over the slums and dirty places, and they'll fly over the meadows too and get a grand view from the top of Snowdon. But some of them have to walk, and those that have no strength of their own drift off into hospitals and other drivelling places. And those that have no stamina get melancholy and say, 'What am I?' 'Where am I going?' 'Why can't I fly?' and so on. And it's only those who are content to do their own stile climbing who see the sunrise over the hill at the world's end. And they're the people with merry hearts. They're people— not commonsense people, for heaven's sake, because *they're* too blind to see the sunlight. . . . Commonsense people drivel themselves into an attempt to cram this great world into the span of their own small brains. Another word for common sense is mediocrity. Your regular Merry-heart is—not a chap who is always laughing, though he may laugh a good deal. He's a chap who takes things as they come and looks ahead for the sunbeams, not in puddles, or in his own fool's head, or round behind him. That's all."

He finished abruptly, because he never liked keeping quite honestly serious for more than two minutes. But what Locritus said then was his own idea of the world —an admission of ignorance, not contented, and certainly not confident. He could not think connectedly; was a trifler with philosophy; but he felt things—to say it crudely—near the handle. All his knowledge was

apparently accidental, really the result of unobtrusive and impersonal observation. Fanny nodded her head sagely.

"Now, why did you ask?" he demanded.

"Do you think Margaret Marsden a clever girl?" Fanny pursued.

"Not outrageously."

"She understands things, though, doesn't she?" Fanny asked.

Locritus hummed a little. He would not commit himself by a declaration on this weighty matter. What indeed could he say?

"I don't see what this has got to do with merry hearts," he said uncomfortably.

"Don't you? She said you had one. I was wondering if she meant the same as your definition," Fanny explained, her grammar becoming tangled. "It's possible she didn't mean quite that. But that suits you. You don't mind taking the footpath, do you?"

"If I was a genius," Locritus said slowly, "I wouldn't foot it. But little beetles like me have to walk. More's the pity. Now, child, dry your eyes and put on your bonnet, for we must go to hear our mother do battle for the sacred cause of femininity."

They were a little late in arriving at the hall, so that they had to sit at the back, which suited Locritus very well. The proceedings had not yet commenced, but they were surrounded by curious-looking people with what Locritus called "idiosyncratic faces." Most of them were

unfamiliar, most of them, again, were women, although here and there were men, young, old, and middle aged. These had come either to worship, to participate, or to jeer, and Locritus speculated as to the stage of their opinions. Unfortunately he could not verify his predictions, because his mother's speech occupied all his attention while it lasted, and he had no time to spare for looking round. Fanny sat close beside him all the evening, clutching his elbow in moments of extraordinary excitement. As he had guessed, she drew in every word eagerly, nodding to herself in agreement, nudging him when man came in for remarks of an adverse kind, and for the most part making no sign, and certainly being no nuisance to her neighbours.

The appearance of Mrs. Lockery, her male opposer, and the chairman—a clergyman interested largely in the organization to which Mrs. Lockery belonged—gave occasion for some applause. The chairman fiddled with some small scraps of paper intended for notes and rose to address a hushed audience. He glanced all round the small hall, which was built in a semicircular fashion, with rows of seats rising from immediately below the low platform until they reached a height of about twenty-five feet above the lowest step.

"There is no need," he said haltingly, "to introduce Mrs. Lockery, who is well known to you. . . . Mrs. Lockery's broad outlook upon life under its modern conditions, those oppressive modern conditions whose—the stifling nature of which condemns the average man and woman to an unnatural combat upon unequal terms

. . . Mrs. Lockery's outlook, its high seriousness, its dependence upon her sympathetic understanding of human nature [Locritus and Fanny exchanged a glance here], are well known to you. I have only to add . . . that Mr. Makins, whose name is already known to you —as I hope his views may be by the end of the evening— has come a long distance to take part in this—ah— friendly discussion. I am sure you will give due attention to what both speakers have to say, that you will very kindly refrain from interruption, and I am sure I can say to Mr. Makins that we are prepared to hear all sides, although most of us [a glance around] are fully convinced that we are in the right, that the time has now come for the establishment of complete social equality between . . . the sexes. I will now call upon our friend Mrs. Lockery."

He sank into his chair suddenly as Mrs. Lockery rose to loud applause.

"See how she holds the table," Locritus whispered.

"Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen," commenced Mrs. Lockery. She looked quite beautiful this evening, for the excitement had brought colour to her face and had robbed her manner of the hardness it usually carried. Her right hand held the edge of the table tightly; she faced the audience.

"This is not an ordinary suffragist meeting," Mrs. Lockery proceeded, at which a feeble-minded youth cheered in great relief. "Perhaps for that reason it will not be as entertaining to those who come to mock [with a steely glance]. My subject is Woman's Place in the

Universe. Mr. Makins has arranged to give you the obverse side: my part is to suggest that woman's present position is an anomalous one, that some entire reconstitution of the relations between the sexes is imperative. Without erudition, I cannot pretend to give you an exact idea of the long tyranny of the other sex. [A cry of "Shame!"] The speaker is right, but 'shame' is a thin word to describe centuries of overbearing. [Locritus chuckled.] There is one initial point I wish to make: it is that the present position of woman is due to the fact that man has made her what she is: she is a man-made article. She does those things which in all the ages men have wished her to do; instinctively she has conformed to man's idea of what woman should be; she has sunk her own individuality so as to please man. . . . You may take the modern situation. Men who are not enthusiasts for the cause of women are for the most part vaguely coaxing. They say, 'Let them stay at home and mind their own business, their cradles, their clothes-mending . . . *never mind their brains!*' [Subdued applause at this point, made with great force and contemptuous emphasis.] Now, we don't believe that women—I don't believe that women have no brains; I believe that, given equal opportunity, the feminine brain is as capable of understanding abstruse questions as is man's. [Shout of "Better!" from an enthusiastic lady with short hair.] Yet—I quite agree with that lady—yet what do we find? That the feminine brain is checked in its noblest functions. Its growth is impeded by the intolerable modern

conditions, just as its growth has in previous ages been checked. . . .

"I tell you, there will not be perfect men and women in the world until we realize that the Spartan women were in the right: they were brave, they were loyal, they were allowed to live! They were not cooped up in dark kitchens, condemned to sicken of the smell of their own cooking, condemned to accept unquestioningly the conditions imposed upon them by men. They had free action, they were part of the community, they lived. Nobody can say the average modern woman, the middle-class Englishwoman, lives. Take from her her sewing, her family's health, her husband's political views, her absurd tea-table gossip—what has she left? ["Womanliness!" cried a middle-aged man, carried away by his feelings.] Then she has left an empty name: the gentleman who interrupted proves my initial statement. He wants woman to live according to *his* conception of her functions. Has he ever spent dreary days by a lonely fireside, cooking food he has no inclination to eat, varying one monotonous occupation with another more monotonous? No! He has talked with other men, laughed at women demanding their rights; he has taken the social standing of women according to a set of rules made by *men*—ludicrous when they were formulated, long obsolete. He cannot conceive the notion of a woman as a separate being, a separate personality, having desire for understanding, for independent life. He only sees women as things—as beings whose end is to marry and live under the thrall of domestic tyranny. . . .

"There are women, many women, who don't want their rights—just as there are women who will assault strangers who protect them from the cruelty of their husbands. They say, 'Oh, let it rest.' But why? Convention has sapped them of their strength, their courage. It is too much of an effort to raise themselves from the abyss. It is just the Aschenbrödel, the Cinderella whose support is so vital to our cause. I would say to those who are in the toils, living only to minister to their children: Is there no capacity in you for a larger field of activity? When you say, 'Oh, let it rest,' are you not echoing men's words, aping men's attitude? It is not feminine nature to let anything rest! Men proclaim it as a grievance. It is, in fact, a tribute. No good work was ever carried through but by enthusiasts, by those whom groundlings call fanatics. No good work can ever be completed on behalf of women without adherents, without united effort. The patient Grissils must shake off their lethargy, must throw aside the selfish claims of their folk, and must embark upon a crusade. They must decide to be craven no longer; no longer to be bound by servitude. I call upon women who do not believe they want their rights to *think!* . . ."

It is impossible to follow Mrs. Lockery's discourse through to its conclusion. The portions above quoted were expressed with considerable emphasis, which had for its source a recollection of the private griefs of her past years. From this point onward the address grew more rational, until the comparatively commonplace style of the opening had been superseded by a torrent of

words, delivered with fire and scorn. The partisans were, for the most part, enraptured—spoke of the living words uttered with an orator's art; although a few of them muttered, "Words—words—words!" Tumultuous applause followed Mrs. Lockery's exhausted finale, in which Locritus found his sister joining with all her might. He frowned at her in joke, but her cheeks were flushed and lips firm set; her hands beat heavily and fast upon each other in a perfect pattering of emphasis. He shrugged his shoulders and looked at the male speaker.

Upon rising, Mr. Makins was greeted with a feeble show of hands, sustained apparently by three relatives in an early row of seats. Locritus helped them a little; but nobody else seemed to offer encouragement. The opening of the reply was inauspicious, for Mr. Makins started with an apology, speaking in a mild tone, with a tendency toward headnotes when he grew warmed. He had, he said, noted several points of general value on his way to the hall, but his notes had unfortunately been left in the train. His three relatives looked at each ather in dumb horror. Nevertheless, Mr. Makins said, he would endeavour to put into words some of these views (he would suggest they were not altogether without serious foundation) which he fancied a good many persons held in opposition to those other opinions expressed (he admitted they were very ably expressed) by Mrs. Lockery. [Temporary applause, during which Locritus shook his head with suspicion of pusillanimity.] Suddenly Mr. Makins commenced his address proper.

"In the days when the Labour Movement—or the

question of the position to be held by the working classes in reference to legislation—was first spread very widely over Europe, there were many enthusiasts who told the poorer classes to demand their rights and to secure them. That is, of course, an essential point of every large movement—the working up of the inert mass of popular opinion into a state of energy. It is a thing granted: I need not discuss it. . . . I wonder if any of the ladies and gentlemen present have read Mazzini's great work, *The Duties of Man?* . . . At the commencement of that book, Mazzini says—I can't remember the exact words—you will find many people to tell you of your rights. He mentions several writers. But, says Mazzini, I am going to tell you of your *duties.* Now at first sight it may not be clear that you need reminding of your duties: but I suggest to you that what Mrs. Lockery has very vividly described as man-made laws may have their origin in that highly utilitarian scheme known as natural law. I have every sympathy with the lonely woman who seeks to free herself from the tyranny of solitude, but I feel very strongly that freedom does not consist in seeking an entirely new outlet for superfluous energy. Mrs. Lockery does not admit—or at least she did not seem to do so—that the schemes she advocates are supported principally by women of the middle class who have not to work either for a living or in the home. These women, having culture and intelligence, wish to find occupation for their spare time: they are tired of unobtrusive good work, they are tired of working subterraneously, so to speak. They want to put

the feminine brain to work upon larger issues. They do not explicitly affirm that men are incompetent; but they revolt against the supposition that women are to have nothing but home life. Now I venture to assert—I know you will disagree—that the Women's Rights Movement of the present day is entirely the result of too much spare time. When Mrs. Lockery speaks of the indifference of some women I think she is dealing with something more powerful—more universal, if I may make a sort of bull—than she imagines. The truth is that the feminine mind is a subtle instrument, delicate, fleeting in its action: it is not set 'dead'; it has its vagaries. Now the masculine mind, more easily led, is yet of a more formal variety: it is capable of regarding abstract things in a manner which is beyond the commonalty of women. This is not mere dogmatism. [At signs of unrest in the audience. Fanny's cheeks were glowing.] It is demonstrable. That is to say, it is demonstrable by observation. When the emancipation of women from the trammels of present-day civilization is considered, the question resolves itself into this: salt water and fresh water are not equal, they have in common the fact that they are water. Now, woman . . ."

The head of Locritus shook for a moment; he listened to the remainder of what was now a familiar discourse with something approaching boredom. At the commencement he had hoped; but he saw that if Mr. Makins had the reasoning mind himself the lowering aspect of the audience had deprived him of it for the evening. He sympathized, but Mr. Makins had embarked upon a

voyage impossible of successful completion. In a word, Mr. Makins had left the ground from which he had started and was now in billowing waters, mast high. The reply ended in a few dismal claps. The chairman spoke in mild disapproval, various excited ladies brandished themselves and spoke vehemently, and the men slipped away. He jogged his sister's arm. Fanny rose as her mother sat down after a triumphant concluding speech, and they went out of the building and sought the railway station.

"It was fine!" Fanny said, with thrilling voice—"it was fine!"

"Rather depressing, I thought," Locritus made answer. "Why can't they dress differently?" he asked. "All got hats that looked as if they'd been sat on! It doesn't give you confidence. Mother was the only decently dressed——"

"What does it matter, if they're only right?" Fanny shook his objection as though it were a rat, and she a terrier. "You can't produce—that man couldn't—a better idea of what women are and should be."

"I was afraid you were taking it seriously, my dear. I thought you would. Personally, I prefer to put the feminine nature on a pedestal and worship it reverently."

"Oh, Charley!" cried Fanny. "I've never noticed that you did that."

"It's my iron self-control," he explained suavely. "I never show it."

"I don't believe you," Fanny announced. "You simply take the easy masculine way. You don't see that women

are independent beings, that they have a real life you don't understand. I told you that you didn't understand me. You pretended you did."

"Come to that," Locritus blustered, "I've never noticed any violent attempt on Mother's part to train you up to independent thought."

Fanny mused a little at that. It seemed to have a flair of truth in it somewhere. She could only admit its approximate accuracy.

"Perhaps she thought I was what she calls a Grissil, and that's why she's always disliked me so," she proceeded. "Perhaps she thought it was no good."

"It may be so," Locritus agreed absently, thinking to himself how different from her usual irritability Mrs. Lockery's manner had been that evening. He was wondering if she had really taken up the rôle of prophet as a relief from her own dreary thoughts.

"Father would have been so pleased to hear her," Fanny said impulsively.

"Yes, wouldn't he!" Locritus answered in a dry way, with a grimace.

No, he could not imagine why his father should be pleased at the address. It would probably have seemed flapdoodle to him. Locritus himself thought in filial kindness that it was rather inspired flapdoodle.

In the train he noticed that Fanny's head hung as though she were in deep thought, and that the head sometimes nodded sharply. He guessed these nods were portents that some strife was at this moment raging in his sister's mind, and he chuckled grimly. With her

sudden flash of sentiment—caught on the occasion of one of Dickers's visits—and this new development, he saw growing up a Fanny, at present immature, but for that reason ready to imbibe knowledge and to foster increased depth of feeling. Locritus was not as entirely ignorant of his sister as she thought: at the present time he foresaw something of a revolution. He was inclined to jeer at first; then he felt sorry that his poor beloved Fanny should have to face these tempestuous agitations. Then, suddenly, he was rather afraid.

"Impressionable," he muttered to himself. "I don't know what on earth I'm to do. Oh, I wish Mother were a possible person, that her mind were a motherly mind —not the mind of a social agitator!"

And Fanny, drowsing first in the railway, then over the fire, then as she undressed and went to bed, was full of her mother's opinions. How fine it had been to see her facing all those people, uttering those flaming sentences that let into Fanny's mind a new flood of light, changing the face of her daily thoughts, giving her own life a new significance even while they threw Charley and her father a little in the background.

"To be free!" said Fanny to herself, and fell abruptly to sleep.

In her dreams she argued successfully with Mr. Makins, who shrank to insignificant size and pretended to be Locritus; and, having confuted him finally, she extorted from Charley, who seemed to change kaleidoscopically from himself to Mr. Makins, the confession that woman is immensely superior to man in the sphere

of abstract reasoning. In recollection, she feared her own contribution to the discussion had consisted principally of dogmatic assertions: "It is; it isn't!" "Anyway," she concluded, "I won. And that's the main thing."

CHAPTER XVI

KITTY UNPROTECTED

Mr. Robert Barlow spent in his favourite public house the greater part of the day on which Mallows had promised to call. On his arrival home, therefore, he was affable even beyond his normal condition of kindly sympathy with the world's morbidly fantastic ill fortunes. He took the precaution of superadding to his store two bottles of whisky: they gave things a more cheerful look, he thought. Furthermore, he found two glasses, which he laid upon the table, and then hunted for a corkscrew, one of the large ones, with a handle rather like a barrel. That discovered in due course, our friend sat and smiled benignly at the fruit of his preparations. In a moment contemplation grew stale, and he sampled the old whisky with satisfaction, smacking his lips.

"*Bon!*" he said.

Time hung heavily in a little while. His gaze wandered round the room and settled on a china cat, grinning from ear to ear, which sat upon the mantelpiece.

"You're a fine specimen!" he said unsteadily. Then he got up and went to the mantelpiece, sweeping the ornament onto the floor, where it dumbled and rumbled,

catching the foot of the table and splitting. Robert made an inept gesture with his right hand: "Couldn't stand grin," he explained mumblingly. He was not intoxicated, but he had taken sufficient whisky to be peculiarly susceptible to the irritating effect of little things catching his eye or his mind. The china cat had seemed to look at him, leering: it grew in a fragment of time to be an oppression from which he must free himself or take some desperate alternative. He was not clear enough in his head to fashion the alternative exactly. "Never mind," he said vaguely, wondering what he should have done.

The double knock Mallows gave startled Barlow. He went slowly to the door and peered round it at his visitor.

"Hullo!" he said dully. "Waitin' for you. Come in."

Mallows entered, hanging his hat on the stand in the passage.

"Here's a fire!" he complained, looking at the melancholy remains.

"Woman," said Barlow, "never lights fire properly. Goes out."

"Rot! It wants coal. What's the matter with you, man?"

Barlow went out of the room for several minutes, coming back with black on his face, his hands covered with coal dust, and a large piece of coal, which he broke with the poker handle. The fragments scattered over the hearthrug and crunched under his feet as he rose and walked about, clapping his hands to dislodge some of the dust. The fire sent feeble flickerings up round the

newly added coal and gradually took it in, growing in strength by degrees.

"Have some whisky," Barlow said, and helped himself to some in the second tumbler. "Good whisky."

"It's all right," Mallows said grudgingly, examining his companion to gauge his precise condition. "Been in town all day?"

Barlow nodded comprehensively—many times.

Mallows then began to talk business perfunctorily, as though he did not care to discuss matters with a man in possession of only half his faculties. Barlow listened stupidly, his hand stealing round to his glass in a mechanical way to fill in the gaps in his understanding of what was being said to him.

"Feel beastly," Barlow explained. Mallows's eye had damped his spirits; he felt a little uncomfortable. "Damp weather makes you very rocky." Mallows nodded. They sat there drinking for a time.

"You're getting on all right with our little affair, I suppose," Mallows remarked. "Did you see Thompson?"

Barlow cast an apprehensive glance at his chief; the name did not sound quite right. He was not very sure of it himself, however, so he merely answered the question Mallows had put.

"All right," he said. "I've fixed up with him. Big fellow, he is."

"So you've said," Mallows remarked testily.

"Out of the ordinary big, he is," Barlow continued, undisturbed. "Great strappin' shoulders. Regular

navvy. . . . Mind, he's got brains. Sound, that's what he is—sound. None of your hanky-panky what's-his-names."

"Quite so." Mallows moved in his chair, as though he were meditating on the best plan for stemming the tide. "Such a mouth you've got! You'd go on talking to Peter, I should think."

"Talk to anybody," Barlow acknowledged, with some pride. "No pride about me. I'd talk to"—he sank his voice to an impressive whisper—"anybody," he concluded. "D'you follow me?"

The constant recharging of his system with fresh glasses of whisky had at last commenced to take effect in no uncertain way. Barlow made wavering illustrative gestures in emphasizing the supreme importance of his trivial remarks.

"What I say is—man wanted for 'mergency's your Englishman," he said. "Good old England. That's country makes men. . . . That's Kitty."

A key turned in the lock of the front door, and a moment later Kitty appeared in the room, still wearing her hat and jacket. Mallows rose and advanced to meet her.

"How d'you do, Miss Barlow?" he said, offering his hand. "I hope you won't mind my intrusion. I had some business to talk over with your brother."

"No business of hers," roared Robert. "Bring home who I like. She can sit in the kitchen. Place for her and those like her."

He spoke thickly and savagely, for he had no affec-

tion for Kitty. Mallows soothed him, and Kitty retired to hang up her hat and jacket. When she returned she found that Mallows had made a place for her at the fire. She smiled at him in acknowledgment: really, he was kind, and not bad looking. It pleased her that a man should think her pretty; she became a little self-conscious under his scrutiny and refused whisky with a slight laugh that betrayed her consciousness. It was not often that Kitty met men at close quarters; talking to them at the Tarratonga was quite a different thing. At the Tarratonga, one said "Don't be an idiot," or "I suppose that's clever," or "Mind your own business," as a matter of form. She had little closer acquaintance with men other than her brother; Locritus she knew, of course, but she hardly classed him with the men she met outside business, for his position was peculiar to himself. For one thing, he had saved her from an accident; she thought he had saved her life, and insisted upon that in her mind. She wished Mallows would not stare so.

"Have you had anything to eat, Mr. Mallows?" she asked.

"No, thanks; I don't need anything," he told her, with eyes of discreet and flattering admiration that she could not fail to notice.

"Not bread and cheese?"

Mallows shook his head; he liked the half-coquettish glance. Barlow roared at her in anger at the persistence in an unwelcome request.

"Let him be!" he shouted. "Man knows what he wants."

Kitty hardly understood what her brother was saying.

"I must have some supper," she said to Mallows. "You'll excuse me."

He nodded at her, and she went along into the kitchen. From the sitting room she heard her brother's voice, murmurous yet loud.

"Fool!" she said. "Why do men get drunk like that? And stupid?"

She cut herself some bread and butter and brought some cold round of beef out of the cupboard, off which beef and bread and butter she proceeded to make a light supper. The fire in the kitchen grate had long been out, and there seemed to be a chilliness in the air that made her shiver. Kitty leaned her head on her hand and thought about the events of the day. It had not been a very comfortable day, she remembered: everything had seemed to go wrong. First there had been a bother about a broken cup, with which she felt sure she was not really concerned. Yet Miss Woods had told her that she had better be careful and had thrown out hints of other misdemeanours duly noted and booked for reference at a later date. Kitty never liked people casting up things in your face by half saying them: why could not Miss Woods say right out what she meant? Perhaps she meant nothing, after all; for Miss Woods was an inscrutable person—a journalist had said so to Kitty—and you never knew where she was going to have you. But then you never knew when she was going to appear at your elbow. Of course she was paid for doing that sort of thing; Kitty knew almost as well as Miss Woods

that the latter's position was no more sure than that of any waitress at the Tarratonga. Still, other manageresses—there had been Miss Cook, who got sacked for being away so often—did not creep as did Miss Woods. They made friends with the girls: you did not mind doing things for a woman who was kind. Some of the girls took advantage of Miss Cook, and sauced her, and took no notice when she called them, or turned up late in the morning with bare excuses and no explanations—said they had missed their train, or been held up in the tunnel through an accident or fog. Kitty had not much sympathy with them; but then she did not care very much about any of the other girls whom she met during the day. There was a good deal of backbiting, name-calling—something she named snobbishness; for the most part it took the form of looking after other girls with sneering, watchful eyes, and concluded with a whispered remark to a neighbour about "some people." Cats, she called them.

Then he had not been in to-day; she wondered why, for he must have known she would be in the smoking room at lunch time. It made a rather dull day when he did not come; there seemed to be a hope during the morning, which sank gradually into disappointment and regret. Oh, well; let him stay away: it was no business of hers—he was nothing to her. Was he not? It wasn't likely he would look at her. Still, there was no harm in thinking of him so long as he did not know it. Know it? What difference was there? So many of the girls loitered, or let their hands brush against those of the

fellows who went to the Tarratonga, and they understood. She hated to see them watching the girls away from the table with leering glances that betokened confidence and familiarity, understanding in a mean sense. Kitty never did that; she had once met a man out who had kissed her—the other girls thought nothing of that: true, there was no harm if you liked the man a little—it was rather fun; but this man she had not liked, and she had felt so angry that before she knew what she was doing she had slapped his face. That had made her a little more careful: if you gave a man an inch he would take as much as he could get. Kitty doubted, and doubted again, for she held the other sex in dark suspicion except when she was talking to them. Some of them were silly. There had been a boy who fell in love with her. He had been rather funny, with languishing eyes and tremblings when she approached. He had told her one day that he loved her. Kitty had laughed, and then felt ashamed, and had explained to him that he was mistaken. Besides, he was a boy. But now things were different. Without her mother, even silly and sentimental as her mother had been, Kitty felt very much alone in the world. Bob . . . he was sitting in the other room, drunk as a—not a lord, for there was no grandeur in his intoxication: Bob was no good to her, and she would not have told him one of her real thoughts for the world. Makeshift thoughts that one exchanged with everybody were good enough for him.

What was there about his friend that she did not like? Some girls would have raved about him, Kitty

thought. She thought him "awful good-looking," with his fair moustache, soft and smooth, and his long-lashed eyes. There was something about him—in the glance, she fancied—that made you look at him somehow in a slightly flirtatious way. But when he was not smiling at you—— Oh, well, it wasn't for Kitty to probe into his personality. He was only a friend of Robert's; she had not seen him above four or five times in her life, and she thought he was probably dishonest, as he was her brother's friend.

Strange she should feel so dismal: it was not—no, it certainly was not that (a nod) had failed to come in that day. She was not one of those silly girls always thinking about men. Perhaps she wanted some fresh air. She had read a stupid book last night instead of going out—about a girl who married a man Scotch fashion, in some tableaux-vivants, and whose father had been rich; her mother was poor but proud; and how the man had always turned up in the nick of time, and in the end won his wife's love. She had read so many of those stories, and the girls all looked the same—demure cats, she described them privately. It will be seen that, in a modest way, Kitty was something of a misanthrope.

While she was thinking all these things to herself, head on hand, the other hand crumbling a piece of bread, she heard slow footsteps in the passage. They seemed fairly steady, yet they were not as regular as her brother's steps would have been, supposing he had been sober. Guessing the irregularity to mean that the traveller was unused to the house, Kitty was not greatly surprised

to see Mallows coming into the kitchen. She was glad he left the door open.

"Here you are," Mallows said. "Aren't you coming in? He's almost asleep. Seems to have been drinking all day."

"Beast!" said Kitty shortly. "I don't like him when he's in this state. He doesn't lose his head easily either. It takes a good deal."

Mallows nodded. Kitty rose to go into the sitting room.

"Oh, don't go yet," Mallows said.

"You just asked me to," Kitty said, her eyes suddenly conscious and haunted. Her heart beat unsteadily at his glance.

"Oh, well," Mallows said, laughing, "what I said then was just because I wondered—if *I* was keeping you away."

"Not at all," Kitty said brusquely. "We may as well go. It's very cold out here. Gives you the shivers."

She pushed past him and went to the door, knowing that he touched her intentionally, and not quite sure whether that pleased her or whether it displeased her very much. She could hardly be rude to him; she was flattered by his eyes and a little excited by his manner. Something there was that attracted her and made her shudder in turn. She went along the passage into the warm sitting room, where Robert half sat, half lay, in a big chair by the fireside. Mallows followed her quickly into the room and shut the door. When she had seated

herself he offered a cushion, and took a long time in arranging it. She felt his hand against her hair.

"H'lo, Kity!" her brother said thickly. "Where devil you been? Skulking . . . kitchen." His head rolled from side to side, as though he had lost control of it and it had become too heavy to hold upright. Then he began to chuckle stupidly and muttered to himself.

"All right now?" Mallows asked softly.

"Thank you," Kitty said. She was not certain whether her voice was grateful or harsh. "It's quite nice," she added. There was no use being rude to the man. He was her brother's guest, after all, and Robert was evidently incapable of looking after him properly.

"Have you had enough whisky, Mr. Mallows?" she asked him, to save a silence that she knew would be uncomfortable.

"Offered . . . served by so fair a hand," Mallows replied gallantly.

Kitty shrugged at that—she did not know what else to do—and poured some whisky into his tumbler. At her rising he was overcome with regrets that she should be disturbed, and offered many apologies. He managed to clasp her hand as well as the glass in the process of transmission; Kitty thought she felt and saw it tremble, and glanced sharply at his face. It was quite white, and she imagined it a little puffy. He too had evidently been drinking.

"Thanks," he said at last, as she paused in pouring out the water. Then in a minute, "It tastes like nectar.

Come, Robert, your glass. A health to the prettiest girl in England!"

"Where she?" asked Robert, opening his eyes, bleared and stupid. "Shoo mean her?" He seemed surprised, even astonished; but he was raising his glass obediently when a further thought struck him, and the glass was cast to splinters on the edge of the fender. "Be damned if I do!" he said, the words being telescoped into an almost unrecognizable mass.

Kitty started up at the shock of splintering glass.

"You idiot!" she cried wildly, her nerves beyond control.

"It's all right, Miss Kitty," Mallows said reassuringly. "I'll see you're all right."

Bob gave a low laugh, leaning forward in his chair and mopping his mouth with his handkerchief, staring vacantly into the fire.

"Poor ol' mater," he muttered. "Place not same 'thout her. As for that——" he added, and then shook his head for a long time in silence. "Ugh!" said Robert. "Ugh! No good."

Mallows drew his chair to Kitty and put out his hand to her. She shrank away involuntarily. Mallows smiled, and she saw the glass tremble as he put it to his lips. He put it down on the floor afterwards and drew both hands across his moustache, which drooped again in obstinate disregard of his caress.

"You're all right, Miss Kitty," he said again. "I'll look after you. He—he's not quite himself. He doesn't mean anything, you know. He's only joking. He's not

quite himself. Been out all day, you know. Met a lot of his friends. He'll be all right in the morning. Won't you, Bob?"

"'S drink," said Robert indistinctly, waving his hand toward the table on which the bottles were.

"Oh, don't let him have any more!" pleaded Kitty, with tears in her eyes. "He's had enough—you can see he's had enough."

She leaned forward so that the cushion slipped down behind her, and looked appealingly at Mallows.

"Allow me," he said, and put the cushion once more behind her head. She felt his fingers in her hair; his coat sleeve touched her face. "The prettiest hair . . ." Mallows murmured.

"'S whisky!" demanded Robert at this point, staring at them fixedly, and moving his reluctant legs as though to get the fresh drink for himself.

"May as well," Mallows told her, and then added louder, "I'll get another glass, old chap. Half a minute."

"What want 'nother for?" Barlow shouted. "Same glass'll do."

"You dropped it," Mallows said. "Don't you remember?"

"That's lie!" came from the big chair. "You're both liars," Robert added—"you and her! Both liars! Want same glass."

While Mallows was out of the room Robert made another effort to get upon his feet. Kitty had hard work to prevent herself from crying out. She felt herself whimpering like a weakling and her lips trembling.

Mallows seemed to break something and came back with his hand bleeding from a slight cut.

"It's nothing," he said, looking at the blood and then at Kitty. "Mere nothing. Here's a glass for him."

"Don't let that vixen do it!" Robert managed to say, as he saw Kitty preparing to pour out his whisky.

So Mallows took the bottle from her hands and poured out a good dose, adding a little water, just enough to make the whisky seem to curdle slightly for a minute.

"I'll put a handkerchief round it," said Kitty, referring to the hand.

She ran from the room to get a sponge, and in the scullery leaned her head against the wall. It needed all her strength to stay a burst of weeping that seemed to shake her whole body. She heard her breath fast and sobbing as the tap spluttered on to the sponge, which grew heavy in her hand. Then, squeezing the sponge, she ran back into the sitting room. The air, smoke and whisky laden, was overpowering; she felt suddenly as though her knees must give way and she be thrown to the floor. Taking Mallows's wounded hand with the tips of her fingers, she wiped away the blood. A handkerchief was enough protection for the rest; she knew the cut, which was not severe, would stop bleeding in a few minutes. Mallows bent over her left hand and kissed it. Kitty snatched the hand away.

"Sister of mercy!" he said unevenly, not looking at her.

She laid the sponge upon the table and stood there for a minute.

"You won't mind if I leave you, Mr. Mallows?" she said. "I'm going to bed. I have to get up very early in the morning."

Mallows was still standing near his chair. She thought the pallor of his face ghastly. He tried to speak but could not frame the words for a moment.

"Are you ill?" Kitty asked.

"Don't leave us yet," Mallows pleaded, raising his eyes and looking at her sidelong for a flying instant. "A little longer."

"I must really go. Are you ill?"

"Nothing. My head's going to burst, I think."

"You'd better go home. The air will cure you. This room's very hot." She spoke in little rushes of words, not knowing what to say; her nerves all grinding and shouting until every limb trembled.

"Nothing'd cure me," Mallows said, shaking his head slowly—"nothing. Oh, I know." His voice was rough; the last words were thick and difficult.

"Well, good-night," Kitty said firmly, moving forward and holding out her hand. "Good-night. I'm sorry to seem unsociable."

Mallows took her hand and held it strongly, although his own shook in violent agitation.

"Don't go," he said.

"I must," Kitty persisted. "Let go of my hand! I must go."

"Don't go," Mallows repeated. "Not now."

Kitty wrenched her hand free.

"Ah, but I will kiss you!" Mallows said in a strange voice, and came close to her.

She turned away to the door, her cheeks burning, her heart thumping in her breast, and her throat seeming to beat to the same furious gallop. Mallows was close upon her and caught her arm. His own right arm was about her waist, his hot lips upon her cheek. In a frenzy she struck him back and caught a glimpse of his face. It was the colour of ashes. The look in his eyes was so passionate, so horrible, that Kitty cried out suddenly. It was a look that showed the very fibre of the man, the black, vengeful heart that nothing could appease.

Aroused by the cry Robert opened his eyes and gave a great roaring laugh that echoed through the house.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FRUITS OF THE DISCOURSE

IT ALL depends," Locritus said, speaking from the folds of his dressing gown, in which he sat by the fire—"it all depends," he continued, "how seriously one regards the lesser portion of society—numerically superior, in spite of my learned friend Mr. Thomas Buckle, but physically—shall I say mentally—— Perhaps I'd better not." His voice failed at sight of Fanny's glittering eye, which his speech had been framed to provoke.

"All I say is—it's their 'usbands," Mrs. Mullins said, busy at the grate, while Fanny prepared a part of their midday meal at the table.

"You mean," suggested Locritus, "that they should look after them better? I quite agree with you, Mrs. Mullins."

"Look after them!" retorted Mrs. Mullins. "*Treat* 'em better, more like."

"They seem to have plenty of time on their hands," Locritus urged.

"Now my 'usband," Mrs. Mullins went on, pausing in her work and seeming rapt in contemplation of the

glowing fire, "he drives me to stand up for my rights. The croolest things. Come 'ome last night like an owl, 'e did. Sittin' there by the fire." (Locritus shivered at the comparison with himself, for he was an invalid and away from the office.) "I says to him, 'Great 'ulkin lout,' I says, ' 'aven't you anything better to do?' . . . Not drunk, you know. Ho, no, he wouldn't do that again after what I said last time! I ain't roused easy, but I'd 'ad enough. I was just sharp with him. . . . That's just it—I don't mean nothing to you, Mr. Charles—but men's all cowards. Treat you bad until you hit back. But I never 'it 'im then. . . . He sat there twiddlin' his thumbs. I thought 'e was going to smash me."

A spasm of a smile rushed hastily across the face of Locritus. He looked at Fanny, who was bent low over her preparations.

"I should think your husband was a very interesting man," Locritus observed, taking up his pipe, and swathing himself more comfortably in his garment.

Mrs. Mullins glanced oddly up at him.

"If you lived with him!" she murmured suggestively.

The Lockerys had once seen Mr. Mullins, who appeared to be a quite inoffensive man, much in awe of his wife. Her interminable speeches about his cruelty and brutality were regarded as romances; they would have been dull, if they had been literal recitals of his conversations with his wife.

"You don't understand the question at all, Charley. I wish you wouldn't make fun of it," Fanny said. "It's

rather vulgar. The idea of woman as a living personality never enters your mind."

Charles pricked up his ears: the remark was not unfamiliar. He smiled elaborately, to produce further manifestations of the independent spirit.

"You think I'm a silly girl—to be laughed at! Well, what do I think of you, should you think?"

He simpered and pretended that modesty prevented him from disclosing the nature of her opinion. She sniffed audibly.

"I think you're just a mischievous, teasing boy, who ought to be thankful he's got such a good-tempered sister."

"Unenthusiastic persons," said Locritus, "are generally good tempered. It seems to be a sort of dead level of high spirits with them."

"I have plenty of enthusiasm," Fanny said—"more enthusiasm than you. You say nothing makes you enthusiastic. Critical calm, I think you call it." She dropped a knife on the floor, and her face was flushed when she picked it up.

"Where's Mother?" Locritus asked. "She gone out yet?"

"I see her going into the study, sir," Mrs. Mullins said.

Mrs. Lockery came into the room a few minutes after this had happened. She carried a book in her hand.

"Your convert has been delivering an extempore address," Locritus told her gaily.

"I'm sure I did no such thing, mum," Mrs. Mullins cried, with some show of pleasant indignation, accompanied with a glance of flattered protest at Locritus.

"I meant Fanny," he explained inexorably, although Fanny's eyes implored him to let the matter rest where it lay. "She's imbibed all your most dangerous ideas, and purposes having the House of Commons turned into a fashionable resort—a more than fashionable resort—without delay."

Mrs. Lockery looked upon her daughter with a chastened disdain and came to her son's side. She still held the book in her hand.

"Just translate a little of this for me," she said. "We may as well employ you, as you're at home to-day. I can't understand Italian at all. Where I've marked."

"But I'm an invalid," protested Locritus. "Where is the jelly? And the grapes? And those other nice things that accompany illness?"

Fanny winked at him—absolutely winked, unashamed. The surprise was so great that he accepted the book from his mother, who went back to her work. He looked at her present and grinned. Upon the title-page was the name of Mazzini. He even chirruped as he called for paper.

"Come, Fanny," he said, "at least we will die game—back to back, old chum. Paper, if you love me. I doubt it, but no matter."

As she brought the paper Fanny's face approached his very nearly. He flinched, but her eyes held no look of vengefulness.

"You doubt it," she said dramatically. "Shall I tell you what sacrifice I am making for you to-day?"

"What?" he whispered. "Tell me."

"I'm—making—roly-poly!"

The face of Locritus became suffused with smiles: he patted his sister on the shoulder in a paternal fashion.

"Suffragist or not," he admitted, "you retain some human feelings and some of the homely virtues. Go on, my child, and prosper. My blessing is upon you."

"You see," Mrs. Mullins said, to improve the occasion by a few words of wisdom, "we women are *some* use, Mr. Charles. Men couldn't do much without us. So I tell my 'usband. He knows it too. Fond of his tea, he is."

"Mrs. Mullins, my esteem for womankind is such that I cannot greet with enthusiasm the idea of exchanging with them angry words across the floor of the House of Commons. My whole opposition to your confederates is based upon respect and admiration. Why women want to struggle when they can get somebody to do it for them, I don't know."

"If you did 'ousework, Mr. Charles," Mrs. Mullins said darkly, "you wouldn't wonder any longer. You can't blame us, Mr. Charles, if you think of that."

"You think the entire question is one of revolt against that?" Charley asked, apparently much interested. From the tail of his eye he could see Fanny's curled lip.

"Oh, don't explain to him, Mrs. Mullins!" said Fanny, checking the performance. "He's only trying to

be clever. You're very silly," she added, addressing her brother directly.

He proceeded with his translation.

Dickers came in the evening. He had heard that Locritus was unwell, by telephoning to the office and ascertaining that his friend was away.

"What's up with you, Loc?" he said, upon entry.

"Cold," Locritus told him. "But the fact is, I wanted a holiday. I've been working like a nigger. There wouldn't have been anything to do to-day; so I thought —stay at home, my boy."

"They said you were queer: I 'phoned them up," Dickers said.

"Have some tea?" Fanny asked.

He shook his head in refusal; but he rather wished he had not had tea at home. His mother had lost the art of making tea—good tea.

"Your tea's always good," he remarked to Fanny.

Locritus hushed him with a gesture. It would not do to have Fanny's head turned.

"One has to be so careful. Oh, Lord! I've been so fatuous all day, Dick," he cried. "Don't you find a cold makes you do stupid things, and say them too? I've been arguing with young Fan about her suffragist opinions."

"She's not one of *them,* is she?" Dickers said, startled. He felt that he was on unsafe ground. He loved Fanny, but for herself; and to think of her as a politician was new and not altogether welcome.

"Is it so very terrible?" Fanny said with irony. "Of course, he exaggerates. He'll say I shall be going about waving an umbrella soon. But that's wrong. I don't mean it's wrong to wave an umbrella . . ."

"It's risky," Locritus observed.

"Only Mother's speech interested me a lot. I'm beginning to realize that girls want to be something more than drudges."

"They are," Dickers answered gallantly; "they're ornaments."

"Not permitted," Locritus warned him. "Fanny eschews compliments hereafter. That's the one healthy part of the transaction."

Fanny took away some of the tea things. Dickers leaned over and looked at Locritus earnestly.

"She serious?" he asked.

Locritus nodded with mystery and delight.

"Makes a difference, don't it?" he quoted.

"I don't think I should like . . ." Dickers began, and stopped as she reëntered. "May I smoke?" he added, showing by the unnecessary inquiry how disturbed his feelings had been by the information Locritus had supplied.

"Dick don't like advanced views," Locritus told his sister. "Makes him feel sick to think of his little friend turning her back on all he admires in femininity. That so, Thomas?"

Dickers looked awkward and shuffled his feet. He did not dare to look at Fanny.

"Oh," she said, with real pain, "I did think you'd always like me. I didn't think you were so fickle."

"I do—I will!" Dickers said hastily and in agony. "Nothing could ever change me."

If Locritus had not been there, he thought.

"I'm sorry you're ill," he said to Locritus.

Locritus pondered at that. It was either preposterous tact, or it was a rather bald way of expressing the wish that he was upstairs.

"So am I," he agreed. "Beastly. But our good Fanny has tried to cheer me—in her incomplete way. Girls don't understand men's needs at all. She's provoked me to constant discussion. I'm sure the doctors would say illness must be overcome with quietness. Fanny's plan to keep me at home for several days is disguised very thinly. She's so selfish she don't see that other people are pining to see me again."

"He's been absolutely silly all day," Fanny declared, seating herself by the fire between the two young men and looking rather aimlessly at some sewing, for which she was disinclined.

"Seen Mallows lately?" Dickers asked.

Locritus checked a roving eye and shook his head sharply, as though the name was not pleasant to hear.

"Not since that evening," he said.

"Shall you be going in to-morrow?" questioned Dickers, who wanted to talk to his friend about Mallows and his scheme.

"Mebbe, mebbe not."

"I decide," Fanny put in. "He's to be ruled entirely by me."

"D'you know a ballad about King Arthur—I think it's called something about Sir Gawain?" Locritus asked Dickers, who did not know it. "Turns on the question what women desire most," he continued airily. "Turns out to be having their own way. Charming thing."

"Must be!" Fanny murmured.

"Fanny is being fed upon it by my cold," her brother proceeded, not very clearly. "I only read it myself this afternoon: that's why I remember it. Do you suffer from bad memory?"

"Shocking!" Dickers admitted.

"Comrade!" cried Locritus. "Rotten, isn't it? I feel my brain reeling sometimes. Fine things in the old ballads: real healthy. None of your puling modern drivel about them. Shakespeare and the ballads—give me them. You may have your big circulations: I want something lavish. Imagination, improvisation . . ."

Dickers did not seem to be listening; his attention always wandered when Locritus talked of the things near his heart. Their friendship was too sound to rest upon kinship or opinions; it had the strange quality of unlikeness that mystifies beholders. Those who knew both wondered what either saw in the other. Yet they walked long miles together in silence, thinking of totally different things, loitering and proceeding independently, and at the end of the excursion gripped hands and went away, both well pleased at having spent a happy time.

Locritus loved and admired Dickers for his solidity and stubbornness and honesty—things he felt he lacked in his own composition; Dickers loved and admired Locritus for his good spirits, waywardness, he knew not what; and thought about him rather seriously in off moments. Neither was extraordinary: the balance lay in favour of Locritus, who saw things more variously, and nearer than his friend, who must forever look at all his experiences through a prospect glass. The relation Locritus bore to Fanny had nothing whatever to do with the personal regard of Dickers: it was an additional but an unnecessary link between them. Truly, he was glad Locritus was Fanny's brother: it give things a better basis. But what was this about Fanny realizing her own individuality? That did not please Dickers at all. In the abstract—yes. But in the concrete, Fanny being the concrete, he fancied it an error, something incompatible with his long-cherished idea of the girl who was sitting within a yard of him.

"Do you like sewing?" he asked her.

Fanny grimaced.

"I've got to do it," she explained. "I don't like it at this precise moment. I hate doing things I've *got* to."

"You're too honest, Fan," Locritus said. "That's not the way to continue a favourable impression. You've sunk miles in his esteem this day."

"That's nonsense!" Fanny replied confidently. "It's ridiculous to pose before people you know."

"She couldn't sink," Dickers added, his indirect retort

showing the timidity he felt in approaching Fanny directly.

Locritus turned one eye upon him, suppressing his first impulse to point out the shortcoming of so ambiguous a remark.

"Isn't he nice to compli—— Oh, but you mustn't! Charley says that advanced women like me like to be treated a little impudently, to show their real worth, and that they're not afraid to meet men on level ground."

"Hardly that," Locritus followed up. "I suspect it's to glory in the vulgarity of the other sex."

"I can only feel *pity* for my brother's vulgarity," Fanny cried, upon an inspiration, chuckling with delight at a small victory.

Locritus seemed much disgusted.

"I don't think even I can take you quite seriously," Dickers said stupidly, slinging in the "even" for the benefit of Locritus, in recollection of his many addresses on the subject of too continuous solemnity. "I like to think of you just as Fanny. I suppose you would rather be called Miss Lockery now."

Before Fanny could answer as her open mouth promised, Locritus rushed in.

"After her twenty-first it will be best. I purpose altering my manner of address," he said. "One feels an increasing gulf."

"He talks as though I were going to the dentist's!" Fanny exclaimed. "I don't think I like being laughed at so much about my birthday. I do wish Father would be here. I wonder if he *will* be able to get back in time."

" 'Merely an earth to cleave, a sea to part,' " Locritus quoted in great style. He loved to throw small pieces of poetry into his conversation with Fanny. They bewildered her, because she could only read Tennyson, who had no inside, Locritus said. Thus Browning was a subject of contention, on the rare occasions that Fanny recognized the ring of Browning.

"You're well informed," she rejoined. "I don't believe he's out of England at all—so there!"

"And why, pray?" asked Locritus.

"Do you remember Mr. Makins?"

"Shall I ever forget his débâcle?" groaned her brother.

"He spoke with the same little accent as Father."

"Wondrous! And then?"

"That's all."

Locritus grasped his head with his hands. They were embarked upon a tempestuous sea.

"I give it up," he said respectfully.

Fanny rose triumphantly to the occasion.

"You admit that your power of logical deduction is inferior to my own?" she asked teasingly and persistently.

"I acknowledge that your intuition is freer and clearer," her brother admitted. "But logic—'tis a thing of which we are equally ignorant."

"Listen. I deduced that he and Father belonged to the same country. I said, would not Father have lost his accent if he had mixed much with—what do you call it? —if he had been a cosmopolitan."

"I never noticed he had an accent," declared Locritus. "He speaks quite decently. I believe you're trumping this up to take away his character. Besides, I've known Scotsmen and Gloucester people whose accent was as rich after years in London as it was in their native wilds. Plenty of 'em."

"Well, I won't tell you any more," Fanny said.

"Oh, do! I'm very interested," Dickers begged, his eyes watching her animated face with renewed admiration.

"I asked Mother where Mr. Makins came from," Fanny proceeded. "She said from Lincolnshire. Well, I remember Father having a letter from Meltonside, which was in Lincolnshire. So you see I wasn't so silly as you tried to make out. I suggest—as you say—that Meltonside is the place where Father's to be found—or where he comes from, anyway."

"Colossal!" Dickers muttered, amazed and delighted.

"Masculine!" Locritus said. "Not a word to Mother, if you love your peace and quietness. I'm afraid it's too good to be true. If he does come back we'll spring it on him, shall we?"

"I should bait him," Dickers said, being now a tactician of the most elaborate order. "Find out a little more."

"I shall do neither," Fanny announced, with greater determination than Locritus had ever heard her show before. "It's not our business to go pestering him. If he hasn't got proper confidence in us—then we oughtn't

to force him to say anything. Only I do wish he'd stay at home."

"Perhaps he doesn't care for advanced views," suggested Dickers tactlessly. The heel of Locritus's boot came sharply down upon his toe. He rose quickly to conceal his horror and pain. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I oughtn't to have said it. I'm very stupid. You'll forgive me, Fanny?"

"It's no worse than the jokes Charley's been making all day," Fanny said, shaking hands with him.

He seized his hat, which lay on the side table. Fanny went to the door with him, but he was so flustered that he did not stop to thank her and walked rapidly home, cursing himself for being a stupid fool who had wounded the feelings of the one he loved best in the whole world. It was all the desire to be smart, he told himself. What a snare cleverness was!

CHAPTER XVIII

JENNY IN SOME PROMINENCE

EVERY morning Margaret's first impulse was to look and see whether Jenny had written to her: sometimes she was disappointed, for Jenny could not write daily, and although she tried to keep a regular correspondence by a letter twice a week, there were times when this could not be managed. On such occasions Margaret comforted herself with the idea that the next letter would be of double length. For four days she had received no word; then one morning came a budget, which she had to read before breakfast, although the clock's longer hand was ominously far advanced, and she had still to brush her shoes—a task never neglected, whatever the temptation. Margaret despised the girls who thought skirts covered dirty boots: she saw many of them going to business in the mornings.

MY DARLING MAGGIE [Jenny's letter ran]:

You have been expecting a letter from me. I know it. But I could not write before: I have had such a nasty headache. It it quite better now, and was never anything alarming—only I could not scrimp up energy to write, and Mrs. Halliday [the lady who governed the convalescent home at which Jenny was staying] said I had better get as much fresh air as possible and not bother about my poor dear pathetic sister. Do you

know, Mr. Lockery has sent me a book! He asked me in a letter whether there was plenty to read down here. I told him we had two of Ouida's and one of Mrs. Trollope's, and a perfect host of yellow-backs, very antiquated and unreadable. Then I said—quite without intention—that I simply panted for a William Morris, or something fantastic and beautiful. So he's sent me *News from Nowhere*, which he says is the most lovely socialistic romance in the world. And, oh, my dear, it is fine! You must be a socialist, Maggie. *Do* be a socialist! Don't believe what foolish people say about "sharing up" or "equality"; no real socialist ever said anything so stupid and crude as that. It is so splendid to feel that people—all people might be healthy if we were not all so selfish. I will explain it all when you come down. And you will come, won't you? We shall have famous arguments, and I shall confute you, and we shall be absolutely happy for once in our lives.

In this letter—accompanying the book—Mr. Lockery says that I am to tell him the kind of book I like and those I want to read. He says he has a lot of books to lend, and that his booksellers are the humblest people alive—they will ransack London, but they will get anything he wants. So he begs I will not scruple to name the most out-of-date book, and he adds as an inducement that I need not be frightened that he is ruining himself, because his booksellers let him pay at the end of the month, when he draws his own salary. Is it all right? I wish you would talk to Mr. Lockery in your motherly way and say I grovel to him for his kindness but that he must not bring his purse into danger; that my appetite is something enormous —literary appetite. And I do wish you would tell him how much I have enjoyed all I have read of *News from Nowhere*. I have written by an earlier post, but it is so difficult to thank anybody properly. But you, since the benefit is indirect—not to yourself, I mean—can be grateful on my behalf to the top of your bent. I am getting quite a stylist, arn't I? (How do you spell "are not" for short?)

To-day I have been out on the cliffs. The sea was grand. The little dancing fairies on the waves were clearer than ever. I told Judith Morrow—the girl here with hair like tow, that I told you about—about it, but she sneered at me. She called

it spume, having read the word in a lurid poem she half knows. Didn't think the wave-crests and squiggles at all like fairies. I felt as though I had been silly. But she is a nasty girl—sophisticated (I have verified that with a dicker), and I have no faith in her. She says *Alice in Wonderland* is stupid, and socialism is "impossible," and Mrs. Halliday an old frump! I don't think you would like her. She saw your photograph on my mantelpiece the other day and said you had nice eyes but didn't know how to do your hair! Considering no amount of doing could ever make her own hair even decent to look at, she well earned the few words I spoke. I said, "Maggie's a dear, and if you were half as nice and half as pretty you'd remodel your conduct." She sniffed and went away. But she's been rather nice since, so I gave her some of the chocolates Mr. Lockery sent. Oh, I didn't tell you! He and Fanny both wrote at the same time, and both said they had persuaded the other one to write. I know which to believe. Fanny is the dearest girl. She writes the funniest hand—only don't tell her, my dear. It is all full of little half-baked letters that look as though they got frightened when they found themselves getting written, and scuttled back again quick. Her letter is mostly about him. She thinks him splendid, but an awful tease!

The supper bell is going—seven-thirty. We are put to bed in a little while, so I shall just finish this and put it in the bag as I go down. Good-bye, my darling. I hope you have written. Don't forget to talk to Mr. Lockery—like a mother, mind you!

JENNY.

Margaret thought about this letter all the way down to the office, and when she arrived she saw Locritus just in front of her.

"Are you better?" she called.

His throat was swathed and his voice a little husky, but he said he was better. She tackled him at once, before he removed his light overcoat, and produced Jenny's letter.

"My sister's written this morning," she said significantly.

"If you think you're the only one!" he retorted, producing an envelope of the same shape as hers from his pocket. "I too had a letter—last night, so mine preceded yours. She's dated the letter a couple of days ago. On the envelope she's written that the letter's lain in her room for a day. Apparently she's been ill. It's hard she should have these headaches. I suppose she won't get rid of them until she's well again."

"I'm afraid not," Margaret said, delayed by the inquiry. "She doesn't have them now as frequently or as bad as she used to. But in my letter" (to come to the point with a rush seemed the only way) "she tells me you've been sending her books and chocolates. You know it won't do."

"Books, chocolates!" said Locritus gently. "One book, one box!"

"I'm told to thank you very much—more than she can write. I don't know quite how to do it. She thinks it would be easier for me."

Locritus said nothing for a minute. Then he spoke hurriedly.

"I think she's lonely. We ought to try and keep her jolly. It's all I can do to send her little things. They make her feel she's not forgotten. Are you going down for a time, as she hopes?"

Margaret looked at him rather sadly. She thought it was perhaps best not to protest against his presents to Jenny: the truth of his remark, though she saw it was

partly a subterfuge to avoid a skirmish, was too apparent to be denied.

"I hope you won't go to a lot of trouble and expense," she said quietly. "I ought to insist. It would be impertinent to insist, though. I do want her to have all the pleasure she can. She's not had much."

"She's had you," Locritus said impulsively, and went into his little office. "Tell her I mean it. She calls me 'Comrade Lockery.' Apparently she's converted to socialistic terms, anyway—or Salvation Army terms, are they?"

"Her letter is red hot," Margaret said, laughing. "She promises I shall be a convert and looks forward to a tempestuous argument. I'm glad she's in such spirits. I'm sure she's better."

"You talk like a worn old lady!" Locritus jeered—"as though there was only accidental happiness knocking about in the world, and none of it coming your way! Don't be pessimistic. Are you going to see her?"

"Perhaps. I'm going to try and contrive an excursion, or a long week-end, or a week's holiday," Margaret told him. "It would be fine."

She drifted into her office as Miss Dilkes swept by.

In the evening Margaret replied to Jenny.

My dear Jenny [she commenced (she thought that looked unsisterly, but she knew Jenny would understand the amount of emphasis to be bestowed upon each word)]:

I tried to be motherly, but Mr. Lockery has been ill, and I hadn't the heart to be rude to him. So I said he'd just better

be careful. He's written a note to-day telling you that he and his booksellers are entirely at your service. What you say about Fanny's writing seems to me to suggest Fanny herself. She does bring out little half-sentences and draw them in again. I think that horrid old lady has given her the idea that she's a perfect little goose. Which, of course, she isn't. I can't help rather disliking Mrs. Lockery, because she's so unnecessarily disagreeable, and although they laugh, I am sure it hurts both of them. Perhaps she is only unhappy.

You will have Judith Morrow pulling your hair if you talk to her like that. I hope you didn't say her hair was like tow. That offends some people, though I expect you would glory in its being said about you. But then your hair is like something else—no, I won't prevaricate—like silk. As for your socialistic beliefs, you shall convert me if you can. Only your skill in argument is not shown in the bludgeon-like way you talked to poor Judith Morrow. It's only that she hasn't got any imagination, poor child.

I believe I *am* getting an old toothless grandmotherly person! Mr. Lockery said as much to-day. I feel I want to moralize, as though things had lost their tang. I want a holiday. Oh, my precious Jenny, I must try and come to you if it's only for a day. By the way, I told you Mr. Frederick rode on the omnibus with me. He's evidently spoken to Mr. Albert, as he promised, for I've had barely any work to do in the afternoons since then, and have sometimes gone home quite early. Florry Dilkes has been quite angry at the equal sharing, and talks about her fingernails breaking with excessive labour! It's ever so much pleasanter.

You seem as though you were getting better, for your letter is quite cheerful. I'm so sorry about the headaches. You must be careful not to overexert yourself. Don't read too much, either, because that's exciting. I don't say that because I don't want you to take advantage of Mr. Lockery's kindness: the advice is pure grandmotherliness. And though it may sound priggish, it's good advice. The picture you draw of the Home's literary pabulum is most attractive. I wonder what sort of people read those books? I expect they were a present from somebody who wanted to get rid of them!

I had just written up to here when there came a letter from Aunt Mallows. It is just one of her usual curt notes, to say that she is coming to town on Thursday and will come and see me providing—this is the nasty bit—it is convenient to me to be in. I didn't tell you before, but Herbert was very rude to me last time I went there—and insulting. He demanded point blank how we'd got the money for you to go away. I believe I suggested it was none of his business. Anyway, he asked if it was Mr. Lockery. I said *"No!"*—I really could not help the story; but I felt that something would choke me if I said, "Yes." Wasn't it impudent!—considering his father refused very crustily! Do you know, my chicken, a horrid suspicion came into my mind the other day that the Mallows family consisted of the three most disagreeable people who have ever existed. I hate Uncle Mallows when he blinks at me furtively, and Aunt always treats us as though we were paupers. As for Herbert —he's odious, as you know.

This is not very cheering to an invalid. I'm in the dumps, though, because I don't quite see how that little trip to see you is going to be managed. Mr. Albert would probably refuse me time off, Mr. Frederick I don't care to ask—he's not quite nice—and the rest of the firm seem to be unapproachable. I shall consult with Mr. Lockery: he'll find a way to advise, I expect. Don't fret.

Your affectionate sister,

MAGGIE.

Margaret sat for some time looking at the letter she had written and wondering whether it was worth while sending in its present state. She had nothing else to say, however, and she was bound to write. Therefore she suddenly started up, sealed the envelope, addressed it, and ran downstairs to post it.

On the morrow she asked Locritus for suggestions as to the best means of getting to see Jenny. The journey was unfortunately too long to be undertaken on the

Saturday afternoon for return the next day. Moreover, the fare was rather heavy, which was a consideration.

"You might be ill," Locritus suggested hopefully. "Turn dizzy."

"What a revelation of your morality!" laughed Margaret. "Why, nobody would believe me—coming back with a red face with the sea breezes. I can't think how it's to be done."

"Whitsun?" Locritus suggested, as a final resource.

"Just the thing!" Margaret cried. They were within three weeks of the Bank Holiday. "That will be fine!"

"Tell you what," Locritus said. "I'll wangle it!"

"No! How?"

"Wait and see," he said.

Later in the day he came to her with beaming face, chuckling and rubbing his hands.

"Well?" Margaret asked, all breathless in her excitement.

"Says I to the boss, 'S'pose you're goin' away for the holiday?' He looked at me as if I'd said something suggestive. 'Not a bad idea,' says he. 'I'd like to,' says I. 'Deuce you would!' says he. 'Rather a good thing to close down Friday to Wednesday,' says I; 'Christian thing,' I says. He was quite carried off his feet. Old Fuzzy" (the manager) "was in there, and he grinned like anything. 'Good,' says Fuzzy. 'Might do it,' says the guv'nor. 'All right. . . .' So there you are. Of course I told him—he knew well enough—that there wouldn't be anything doing. Impudence—that's what it is!"

"He's never been talked to so in his life," Margaret said, stupefied.

"Oh, yes; I'd never have dared if I hadn't been pretty sure. He always is rather good tempered when I see him. He thinks I'm a freak. Anyway, you've got your holiday. Me too. I shall take the excellent Fanny for a jaunt somewhere."

Later on he realized the enormity of his suggestion to his employer. It was rather impudent to go upon such an errand, even if the object were a good one and the issue successful. Why had he done it? He certainly did not want the extra days himself, except as he wanted all possible holidays. That question was agitating him oddly during the morning, as he bent dully over his work, with a feeling of languor and heaviness which only a parting cold can bestow. It was all very well; he would personally do a great deal for Margaret Marsden—a great deal. Anything in reason. Reason? His brain took strange jerks in its endeavour, a stupid, cold, affected endeavour, to reduce his conduct to a rational definition. Reason? What had reason to do with it? He had done what he attempted: he generally did that. But it was not enough to pass the matter over idly, as he generally did. Things had, he felt, come to a crisis. This was no ordinary occasion. He was greatly disturbed in his mind, and if he had not felt so miserable with his villainous cold, which hovered round him with diabolical persistency, he would have solved the question without difficulty. It did not want solving: the question itself

would never have arisen but for his brain being clouded at this moment.

But other perplexities were in store for Locritus on that day. He was to receive more than one surprise; and the greatest of them was of so unpleasant a nature that he looked back upon the day with something of loathing.

CHAPTER XIX

MALLOWS PAYS A CALL

SINCE her access of personal dignity—her mental renaissance, as it were—Fanny had found plenty of material upon which to use her mind. She was aware that something had happened within her, that a new life seemed to stretch out in a broad path of splendour; but that knowledge was a mere basis upon which she was building other things, dogmatic, half-reasoned, and wholly irrational. She took as true—once for all—a statement Locritus had once made, to the effect that knowledge (the word signifying in this sense the sum of amassed learning) was but a starting point, that it must serve only as a platform from which to dive into the unknown. Said by Locritus, with a facetious assumption of profound thought, the idea was one of those *obiter dicta* flung off for his own amusement: transformed into a real declaration of import by Fanny's unsophisticated judgment, the remark carried danger with it. Thus Fanny, taking as her groundwork the consciousness of a destiny higher than dish-washing—an unassailable truth—became in spirit something of a reformer. She read books which had hitherto held no attraction; even

now they conveyed only the meaning she was content to receive;—she thought to herself, talked to Mrs. Mullins, tried to argue with Locritus, who refused altogether to take her seriously.

In the strength of her convictions Fanny found comfort, but she was also rather inclined to lose her temper with Locritus; in his laughter she found a concealment of prejudice and ignorance. In a word, Fanny began to think her brother was found out. That he was a charlatan, she would have denied with her last breath; but that he was sometimes guilty of improvising his opinions she had no doubt at all. It was a blow to her, because she had so pinned her faith to his integrity. Thus, in the moment of emancipation, Fanny grew into a certain scepticism hard to bear by the young. It was a time of disillusion; she thought the earth less sunny than she had supposed. She still believed in those with whom she could agree, but poor Dickers suffered at her slightly changed manner, so that all the consolation he could bestow upon himself was not enough to give him confidence. He dropped calling, partly in protest, partly to save himself from humiliation. Locritus viewed the turn of affairs with resignation; he hoped—nay, believed—that the development of his sister's mind would hereafter be less abrupt, that her decisions would become less arbitrary. He loved Fanny truly, and if he had been less occupied with other matters, and less bewildered by his cold and its evil effects, he might have given more serious attention to the crisis in her affairs. As it was, she was alone, all afire with enthusiasms, and open to

attack from other directions. She was quite confused by the number and the importance of those ideas which somehow or other had been flung into her mind, all headlong and wriggling; and the sorting out was a work for which her previous training had fitted her ill.

Although they now had excitement in common, Mrs. Lockery and her daughter rarely spoke to each other. Fanny's advances, extremely timid, met brusque responses that made the girl shrink into temporary sullenness that was really foreign to her nature. Did she try to make friends, her mother snubbed her for a fool, being so used to thinking of Fanny as a drudge with no inclination but that of affection for her brother. With Locritus—with his occasionally sharp tongue—Mrs. Lockery came into conflict as rarely as possible; with Fanny, on the other hand, victory was easier and more frequently sought.

One day—the day Locritus returned to the office after three days' absence—Mrs. Lockery was busy on a report for her society; she was therefore surprised, and only half pleased, to hear the gate creak with the importance it felt at opening to an afternoon caller.

"Bother!" said Mrs. Lockery; "I *can't* leave this." As Fanny looked into the room before going to the door, she said, "Whoever it is must wait till I've finished this: I'm too busy to stop now."

Fanny found it was Herbert Mallows who stood on the doorstep.

"Oh!" she said, with unaffected pleasure. "How d'you do?" Forthwith she held the door wide open, and

upon his entry led Mallows into the sitting room behind the study.

"Mother won't be long," she explained. "She's busy on some papers she must finish. She'll be so sorry to keep you waiting."

"I shall be very pleasantly entertained meanwhile," Mallows said—"I don't doubt," he added, to carry off the crudeness of the remark.

"Thank you," said Fanny gaily. "That's very kind."

"It's very true," Mallows said, "which is more to the point. How are you? And how's—Charley? Is he better? I heard he'd been ill."

"Yes. He's had a bad cold. He's all right again now, though," she answered.

"And you?" he persisted.

Fanny's cheeks grew a shade rosier at his tone, and her voice was very quiet.

"I'm all right," she said quickly. "I never have anything the matter with me."

"You have a very quiet, happy life," Mallows said, with the air of a man looking upon peaceful harbourage with a fond but unavailing eye of affection.

"Very quiet," Fanny agreed, "and uneventful."

"Not happy?" he asked, with greater surprise than he felt.

"Not contented," Fanny demurred. "I have many things to make me happy."

"Your brother, for instance," Mallows suggested, with sharp eyes open.

"Yes, indeed," Fanny said promptly.

"Your father being away so much must be a trial," Mallows went on.

"I wish he were here more often," Fanny admitted with a sigh. "I miss him when he's away. He said he would try to come back next week. I don't know whether he'll be able to or not. We've had no letter at all."

Mallows could not think of anything more to say for the moment, so he let his gaze wander round the room. An open book was on the table, a well-known one by Mary Wollstonecraft. He did not know it, but saw by its title that it dealt with the question of woman's position in the universe. He whistled in putting it down, and looked up to see Fanny smiling at him.

"You reading that?" he said in a questioning voice. "What a learned little woman!"

Fanny had no objection to the phrase "little woman," never having seen it bathed in the irony of Tommy Sandys. She nodded, with a pleased laugh, at being thought learned, and at exciting the surprise of such a man as Mallows.

"I'm afraid I don't understand it all," she admitted.

"Shouldn't think you *did!*" Mallows said, rather tactlessly. "Why, it's fearfully deep, I should say. I didn't think you went in for that sort of thing."

Fanny could not see the vagueness of his remark. It delighted her that Mallows should have something to admire in her—other than her face, at which she knew he liked to look.

"I'm a great believer in women taking their share in things," Mallows continued, with an expressive glance.

"We men get all the plums at present. 'Tisn't right, you know. It's quite time the laws of the country were developed . . . so's to give women a fair show."

Fanny thought the speech a noble one: then she was not quite sure. It had too much the air of "Poor thing!" about it to please her. But then, of course, he did not frame sentences as readily as Locritus, who had an ear for construction. The admission was good; the expression might have been improved; but let the will stand for the deed in this case. Mallows listened with an air of interest to some remarks called forth by her self-communings of the last few days. He had no idea what she was talking about; her own theory was somewhat evasive—it had a trick of losing itself in a heated phrase. Nevertheless, Fanny was warm and pleased when she finished breathlessly.

"I'm only a girl—but that's what I think," she said.

"Quite right too," Mallows agreed. "There's a great deal in what you say. I wish some of these chaps that oppose it could hear you say it."

"Oh, no," Fanny objected, shaking her head. "Many people far more clever and far better than I am are saying wiser things about it."

"Yes, but not so nicely. Besides—may I?—most of them aren't so charming—well, I mean they don't fetch you. . . . Oh, you've no idea what a difference it makes! Get a pretty girl to say a thing, and you'll have all the men round believing it as hard as they can."

The speech jarred on Fanny. She did not like it—saw in Mallows, perhaps, only a young man who might be

so attracted. Then her enthusiasm wafted away the feeling, and she ignored the part she did not care to store for her future solitary satisfaction.

"Mother is a great worker," she said.

"So she said. I mean, she told me she was very much interested in these things. I had a fine talk with her one day. I suppose you and she discuss them?"

"She's no time for that. I heard her lecture a little while ago. At least, it was supposed to be a discussion."

"I expect the one who opposes her didn't get a look in," Mallows suggested.

"It was awfully poor. Charley said so—he's as biassed as can be. At least, he pretends to be, to annoy me."

"I'm sure he doesn't succeed," Mallows said gallantly.

"No; I know him too well," Fanny crowed. "Still, he's pleased to do it, on the chance. While he was ill we had some battles. When I beat him he explained he was ill and that I was hitting him when he was down. It wasn't that at all. Only, he's so ready."

Mallows nodded in vigorous agreement.

"I know," he said. "People who are prejudiced always say they haven't studied the matter. I've found it so myself."

"The man who replied to Mother was a Lincolnshire clergyman named Makins. Perhaps you've heard the name?"

Mallows started and looked at her sharply.

"I may have," he said dubiously. "No, I don't think so. Have you ever been in Lincolnshire?"

"I've not the faintest idea what it's like," Fanny said. "I've never been out of Hertfordshire, except with Charley to the seaside. Have you been in Lincolnshire?"

"No; I was wondering if you knew what part he came from."

"No; only I asked Mother where he belonged."

Mallows nodded again.

"Do you say your father will be back next week?" he asked, after a moment's pause, during which Fanny put a book marker in her book, and laid it on a sidetable.

"Well, he said he'd try. We can't be sure until we see him," she explained. "I do hope so. I'm going to get the tea now, Mr. Mallows."

They had a slow tea, with Mallows making small remarks and asking occasional questions, all very amicably and without any particular significance. The teacups passed backward and forward three times, and Mrs. Lockery made herself as agreeable as her preoccupation would allow. After tea Mallows suggested taking leave but was prevailed upon to wait and see Charles Lockery, who was expected home shortly. Fanny endeavoured to entertain him by playing and singing a little, which gave Mallows a further opportunity of noting how delicately her hands touched the keys, how easily her head was poised, how graceful she was in every way. His eyes took in all the details of the furnishing, saw that the chairs were old-fashioned but good, that the other articles of furniture were on a level with the chairs as far as quality went—the phrase, like the perception, is that of Mallows—and once, in the midst of Fanny's per-

formance of a dainty minuet tune, he rose and examined a portrait of Mr. Lockery as a younger man, which stood upon the mantelpiece. It might be that he was tired of music, Fanny thought, conscious of his movement and the inattention it betrayed. She therefore closed the piano as she finished the minuet, and came back to the fireplace.

"Oh, don't stop," Mallows said; "I was enjoying it. I just caught sight of this portrait. Is it your father? I've never seen him, you know."

"Haven't you? Yes, that's him. You must see him next time he's at home. He's so splendid, so dignified, so —everything that a father should be. That's my opinion: but I think everybody who knows him must admire Father."

"I'm sure he must be admirable," Mallows joined in. "He's got a good face. What I call a clean-cut face. There's no nonsense about him, I should think. Young Charley's not much like him, is he?"

"No," agreed Fanny. "I wonder why that wretched boy's not home? He must have missed his train, I should think. I do hope he's not going to be late, with that cold. He said he'd try to leave early."

"I expect he's all right," Mallows assured her. "Afraid I mustn't stay any longer, though. By Jove, it's quarter-past eight! I never thought it was so late. I'm very loath to tear myself away—I am really. I've had a capital time. Shall you mind if I call again—very much?"

"Would you care to?" Fanny asked. "I'm sure we shall be delighted."

"*You* won't be bored?" he asked, with quite distressing anxiety.

"It's a treat to have a visitor," Fanny declared, with disappointing avoidance of the personal note he had introduced.

"I don't like being classed with the curate," he persisted.

"Why not? He's a very nice young man. But he never stops to tea with us. I don't think he's very fond of Mother," Fanny made answer.

"Shall you be pleased if I come?" Mallows asked her, putting the question in its crudest form, with the artifice of a navvy.

"I shall be very pleased," Fanny said, and her eyelids drooped slightly under his glance.

On his way out Mallows stepped in to say good-bye to Mrs. Lockery. She looked at him in bewilderment from behind her papers.

"Oh, you're going!" she said. "I'm so sorry to have been so little of a hostess to-day. You must come again when I'm not so busy."

"Thank you very much," Mallows said with gratitude. "I will."

"Of course, I'm often busy," Mrs. Lockery said warningly, at this.

"You have a great deal to do," Mallows added, to complete her remark. He smiled as he spoke, and fingered his moustache, which caught the light of the lamp and glowed like gold. "But I'll take my chance, if I may."

"Do!" Mrs. Lockery said, looking at him with an expression almost of interrogation in her eyes.

The postman here hammered at the door, bringing only a post card from Locritus to say that he would be late, and Fanny ran out of the room, thinking it might be a letter from her father giving the date of his return.

Alone together, Mrs. Lockery and Mallows exchanged a glance of deeper meaning, as though it were in confirmation of the question Mrs. Lockery had asked mutely a few seconds before. Mallows stepped nearer to her and spoke in a lowered voice.

"I may have some news for you," he said—"later."

"You've been making inquiries?" Mrs. Lockery asked quickly.

He nodded as Fanny came back into the room bearing the post card.

"You might have waited in vain," she said, showing it. "Charley's going to be late. What his cold will be like after this I'm afraid to think. He *is* a thoughtless boy."

CHAPTER XX

AN EVENING EXCURSION

WHEN Locritus went to lunch, he promised himself a relief from the anxieties which had suddenly beset him. He entered the portals of the Tarratonga Depot with a placid smile of anticipation, thinking that it was nice to have one hour alone with a book in a smoky atmosphere, where the hum of chess and draught players (he despised your draught player equally with his domino brother) was not too insistent. The book Locritus carried in his breast pocket was Richter's *Quintus Fixlein,* which he loved—making a point of rereading it, as he reread all his other favourites, for the sake of its ever-fresh humour. That disappointment should be in store never entered his mind; yet—as he was rarely surprised by the untoward—he counted on nothing as absolutely determined.

To his table went Locritus, and hung his hat upon a peg. The bill of fare was of the chief importance. Glory! There was apple pudding, next best thing in the way of sweets once one had abstracted those filthy cloves that bad housewives use as cloaks for inferior apples.

"Why, Kitty," he exclaimed, at her white face and heavy eyes, "are you seedy?"

"I'm all right," Kitty said sombrely, looking away as she spoke. "Why haven't you been down before this week?"

He explained that he had been ill and commenced to describe his agonies. "You ought to have a holiday," he said suddenly, interrupting the flow of his discourse. "You know you're as ill as you can be. Look at that!" He pointed to the dish in her hand, which was shaking obviously.

"Never mind that," said Kitty. "What are you going to have to eat?"

Quintus had nothing to say to Locritus at this juncture; he thought Kitty must be in trouble and was concerned at the idea. Later, when she returned, he put the question into words.

"Has that old lady been rowing you?"

Kitty shook her head.

"I don't want to hurt," Locritus said, after looking round to see that nobody was near enough to hear, "but you look pretty gloomy, as though you'd been fighting. You're sure nothing's wrong?"

"I can't always look my best," Kitty said, with a feeble attempt at jocularity. He looked back at her with kind eyes that she would not meet because she felt they would read more than she could bear. "I've got the hump," she confessed.

"Cameelius!" Locritus commented. "You rather look it, my child. You want a change. Will you come to the theatre?"

She shook her head decidedly.

"Far better," he urged, and Kitty went away to serve the customers. He noticed her near him, but read his book in peace, although he could not understand it clearly, owing to his cold and his perturbed thoughts. Kitty noticed that Locritus was waiting, and returned presently.

"Apple-dump," Locritus ordered, and she went away again. When it was brought she stopped.

"Are you sulky?" Kitty asked. "I didn't mean to make you wild."

"I was not," Locritus protested. "But what *did* you mean to do?"

"I don't know. I'm not very well. If you like, I'll go."

"Only if you think it would cheer you up," he urged.

"I'm sick of myself—everything!"

"Then you *do* want a change. All right. You think where you'd like to go and tell me at tea-time. Can you be ready?"

"Oh, yes; it's due to me," Kitty said.

Locritus nodded, and bothered no more. He remembered with self-reproach that Fanny had ordered his early home-coming, and cancelled out by pleading extenuating circumstances. He liked young Kitty: she was a good girl. Perhaps her brother had been ill-using her. His own sister was gloomy if he was rude, and he could not imagine Kitty as forgiving by nature as Fanny. Her training had been different; by character she belonged as much to a slightly lower class as she did by breeding.

Locritus had met—even talked with—many girls, but

he only knew four—namely, Fanny, Margaret, Jenny, and Kitty. In them all he saw qualities, not in comparison, but as distinct personal traits. It was easier for him to talk to Fanny and Jenny, because they were young and might be teased more easily than their elders. Margaret alone gave him discomfort, because he felt he must support a character, that he must on no account lower himself. It sometimes put him in straits, for he read criticism behind her friendly glance that made him a little uneasy, and overanxious to do right and to conceal his failings. The result was defiance, or a constraint that gave a peculiar bitterness to his most confidential talks with her, since he was always trying to be the slightly cynical philosopher, the fatherly adviser, when every genuine feeling in his character told him to sit at her feet and learn. Which, as Locritus had frequently observed, would have been *infra dig.*, and would not have been tolerated for one moment by Margaret herself, so keen was her sense of the ludicrous.

For Kitty his respect was enormous; he thought the life of a waitress hard and full of pitfalls. From the change in girls who had come fresh to the Tarratonga he gathered that experience made them overconscious, so that they could not stand still or take an order without some display of hauteur, or impatience, or coquetry, or silliness. He argued that to remain clear-eyed and free from a tendency to garrulousness was a proof of her nature that demanded genuine respect. He looked forward to her recovery from depression, and trusted that the excursion of the evening might put all right. A

little boy was induced to run out and post a post card to Fanny, saying that he should be late. Locritus hoped she would not be so angry as to punish him, particularly as the day was mild.

Whatever anticipations he may have formed as to the cheery nature of the evening were blown to the winds as Kitty and he walked up the Strand. She tried to be conversational, but met with no success. Locritus talked gently of his days by the fireside, and described how Fanny had made him favourite dishes each day.

"Because I told her," he added, "that I was accustomed to princely living. You know, Kitty, you don't appreciate the things of this life."

"What's the good?" Kitty asked seriously. "I see men eating every day. Most of them only do it as a duty. You, with all your talk of roly-polies—you read all the time you're eating."

"But, child, have you never noticed how good-tempered I am, how much the digestion is helped, how the enjoyment of the book is increased?"

"Reading doesn't help the digestion," she replied inexorably.

"I can't help what doctors say," he told her. "The chief aim of life is happiness. For yourself and others, happiness. I don't believe in asceticism."

There was no reply.

"You must surely have noticed—" Locritus went on —"if not with the Tarratonga, at least with your brother."

"I don't want to talk about him," Kitty said.

Locritus nodded slowly to himself: then one of his surmises had been correct. It was clear to him that the brother had been at the bottom of this sullenness. He was glad it was the brother: fights in the family could be patched up, where others smouldered because the parties did not meet. Have a thing out and done with it, Locritus explained to himself! That was always the best. It was the gradual drifting apart that made friends into acquaintances and acquaintances into people you once knew. He was quite pleased with his insight.

They had reached the Savoy and joined the pit queue. There were only a few people waiting, as the hour was yet early.

"I'm not with my brother now," Kitty said.

Locritus felt that his satisfaction had been premature. He debated.

"Was that unavoidable?" he asked. "Are you on your own now?"

"I've got a room at Draycott," she explained. "I couldn't have stayed."

"I only meant—he was a sort of protector," Locritus ventured. To his surprise her head drooped at this, and he hurried on: "Ever seen *The Gondoliers* before?" He saw her head shake, and launched into a comment upon *The Gondoliers,* explaining wherein it differed from the others of that unparalleled series from which he had culled his choicest quotations, from which too he had derived his greatest pleasure. In saying to Fanny that he had no enthusiasms he had made a reservation in

favour of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas. To Locritus they supplied an inexhaustible store of riches, like the magician's purse in which there was always gold. Locritus waxed eloquent; only the crowd prevented him from rendering snatches of his favourite songs. The panegyric was hardly concluded when a gentleman came up and delivered a recitation about an owl in a barber's shop, which—condemned by a superior young man as a poorly stuffed specimen—finally flew down from its perch in protest. A protean but "aitchless" actor disported himself later, and by the time his performance was completed a great rattling of bolts and chains stirred the crowd into life and a steady press.

Even the humour of the Duke of Plaza-Toro failed to arouse Kitty, although she exclaimed at "Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes," and applauded the dance with vigour. Had his own enjoyment of the words and music and acting been less keen the evening would, by reason of her sadness, have seemed melancholy to Locritus; as it was, he laughed crowingly as they came out of the theatre and in crossing the Strand dodged cabs and other flying vehicles that scattered the individuals forming little black knots of people into tremulous waifs beckoning each other to seek safety. They took the tube to King's Cross and found a train waiting at the platform: even as they entered the carriage, the guard's whistle blew wildly, and rushing feet showed gallant efforts on the part of late-comers. They had the carriage to themselves.

"I can't honestly say you seem riotous," Locritus said, turning to Kitty. She smiled back at him, but very

faintly. He whistled an air from *The Gondoliers* to pass the time, and let his head rest back upon the cushions, watching the result of some energetic youth's ingenuity in converting "TO SEAT SIX PERSONS" into "TO EAT SIX PERSONS!" It appeared to him hardly worth while to go to such elaborate trouble for such a small result; it reminded him of a school chum spending an evening in carving down a leaden "nicker" to put into a penny-in-the-slot machine.

What was the matter with Kitty? She was as woful as an owl. It seemed as though her head drooped upon his shoulder. He bent over and kissed her further cheek as she sat beside him—a friendly, boyish kiss of fun, to provoke a laugh, recriminations, coaxing, and contentment. To his surprise Kitty shuddered suddenly and put her hand on his, all trembling and hot.

"Why, you're not crying, are you?" he asked, at her averted head. "What's the matter? Do tell me—there's a dear girl. What is it? Can't I help you? Oh, you're silly to cry!"

"You're all alike!" Kitty sobbed. "All——!"

What did she mean? Locritus was ready to be penitent, fatherly, even friendly, but he could not think what to say, how to show her that he was full of sympathy.

"Can't I help you, really?" he repeated. "I'm so sorry, Kitty. I know it's absurd to say it like that; but if you tell me how I can help you I'll do it like a shot. . . . You *must* tell me—simply must."

"It's all right," she said, with her voice still shaken,

and hands trembling as they held the kerchief with which she wiped her eyes. "It's truly all right. I was only silly." Suddenly she laughed feebly. "Isn't that sort of thing silly?" she said. "I couldn't help it."

"It's rather alarming," Locritus said, trying to be droll.

"Is it?" she asked. But when she looked at his face her courage gave way. "It's no good," she said brokenly, and put her hands to her face. Then, "How hot my hands are! I think I'm mad! Don't you?"

"I think you're ill," Locritus said slowly, watching her trembling lips as the hands were withdrawn, and seeing again deep shadows beneath her eyes. "How long's this been going on?"

He now sat opposite and leaned forward, so that she could not easily evade his glance. Her eyes were restless, looking anywhere but at him. At last she was compelled to look up.

"I can't stand it," she said. "You *must* forgive me. I've spoilt your evening."

"That's not what you want to say," Locritus told her.

"You look so kindly," Kitty murmured; "I'm ashamed."

"Nor that," he said quietly.

"I'm so unhappy that I want to die," she commenced, so low that he could hardly hear. "I would give anything to die—but I haven't the courage. Oh, I can't tell you! Don't you see I can't? Your eyes seem to burn me."

"I'll look away," he said. "There, I'm not looking."

Finsbury Park station seemed to glide past the windows; two men got in and talked about cricket. They chattered loudly, with sidelong glances at Locritus and Kitty, and discussed the chances of their club in a local competition. Locritus handed the programme across to Kitty, who thanked him without speaking above a whisper. They sat in silence until they reached Draycott.

"You're not coming?" she asked, as the train drew up and Locritus rose.

"Of course—unless you forbid me."

They walked slowly from the station, from the bright High Street, with its glaring lamps, into roads with houses on either side, some with lights showing, others quite dark and silent. The trees, with their fresh, thick clusters of leaves, caught the faint wind and seemed to send a whispered message from branch to branch until the farthest trees took up the burden and rustled in vaguely ominous reply.

"How eerie it is to hear the leaves," Locritus said, "especially when there's no moon. There's clouds, I think—aren't there?"

"I suppose so," Kitty returned. She stopped suddenly, and made him stop too, where the houses stood right back from the path. "In the train I couldn't talk," she said hesitatingly. "You can't see me now. I must tell somebody. I feel as if I should have to do that or go mad! Perhaps I'm mad now!"

Locritus waited stolidly, his mind still active, engrossed. He hardly heard the words, could only let his

busy thoughts go on, imagining, turning this way and that all that had passed earlier, remembering her expression, her pain . . .

"I've often told you things I've never said to anybody else; I don't know why. I've got no friend but you. You are my friend, aren't you?"

"Try me!" Locritus said, not promptly, but with decision. "Haven't I begged you to do that? That's why I asked whether I couldn't help you."

"I know," she said. "I didn't mean to question." She stared down the black road, away from him, and shivered a little in the cold air.

"Shall we walk?" Locritus suggested.

"No, no! Let me tell you. You wonder I've left my brother," Kitty went on rapidly. "If you knew . . . I told you he was a bad man—a dishonest man. But he—he was drunk, quite helplessly drunk, and laughed —laughed while his sister was killed . . . worse than killed! I couldn't forgive him. All my life I couldn't forgive him that. He brought home one of his friends —his friends. We were alone, we three. The man—what a coward—a coward!"

She stopped, panting, and put her hands to her burning cheeks. Locritus could only murmur little incoherent phrases of sympathy that he knew were meaningless, worse than helpless. He could not touch her, could not put his arm around her as he did in consoling Fanny: in his difficulty he did nothing, only muttered that she was to say no more. Kitty cried quietly, with bent head. He put his hand upon her shoulder in awkward comforting.

"I had to tell you—but I was frightened," she whispered—"frightened you should think me, think I was not unwilling."

They stood together in the darkness of the deserted road, and Locritus took his hand from her shoulder, and then put his arm around her. She raised her white face to his and looked at him with strained eyes.

"If you will tell me where the man is to be found" . . . Locritus said simply.

"I'll never tell you that," Kitty panted—"never in my life."

"Yes, you will," he said; "I beg you to."

"No!" She shook her head; he could see it in the darkness.

"It's all I can do now," Locritus urged.

"You won't think less of me for this?" she begged. "You . . ."

"I am waiting for the name," he said firmly.

"Tell me," she persisted. "I can't give you his name."

"I admire you more than ever," Locritus told her. "But you must let me see him."

"I wouldn't marry him," Kitty said. "Let me go now. I can't tell you. I'm nothing to you—nothing. You'd only get into trouble. I *can't* tell you."

She put her hands upon his shoulders and looked up in his face again.

"Don't be frightened," she said, "will you? I shan't do anything silly. I'm a coward. It makes me whimper. I wish——" She let her hands fall. "You go home," she went on. "You see, I shall be happy again in a few

days. You understand I couldn't live there any longer. Good-night." She went from him, although he tried to keep her.

"She shall tell me," Locritus whispered to himself. He followed, running as she ran, until he could find no trace of her, and the roads branched in several directions. Then he turned and went slowly back until he struck the main road, along which he walked in the darkness, watching the lamps ahead, which bordered the straight road, until they disappeared from sight in the distance. He was burning with anger, and yet he was cold as steel with the thought of vengeance. All thought of anything else was driven from him by the knowledge that Kitty was in agony of mind and that he alone could fight for her. He hardly knew how fast he walked, or how gray and stern was his face.

CHAPTER XXI

AN AFFRAY

SOMEHOW, Dickers found his life rather empty when his dread of giving Fanny any cause for displeasure prevented his going to call upon the Lockerys. He hung about at the railway station on purpose that he might see Locritus and talk to him; but his friend seemed suddenly to change his train and go either earlier or later, and Dickers waited in vain. He thought, with something of grievance in his mind, that it was hard he should for so long have been denied the pleasure of a long talk with Locritus. At times, when the desirability of intimate conversation had not been so apparent, he and Locritus had travelled together daily, gone a-walking together on Sundays, and kept silence for an hour. Now, Dickers felt he wanted to explain. He wanted to explain himself—that sensitive self that Locritus thought so impervious to all feeling (thus Dickers believed, in spite of his friend's assumption of knowledge), and so needless of explanation—he wanted to explain about Mallows, about Fanny, about everything. There lay in his mind a whole host of things to say to Locritus, and instead of being dispersed in talk the important portions grew to a riotous insistence, and those of less im-

portance fell into a sort of atrophy and ultimately faded out of his thoughts altogether.

To ease his mind, and for a sentimental reason, Dickers paid each evening a duty call at the Lockerys', not knocking, or even swinging the gate, but wandering by on the opposite side of the road, with a furtive eye upon the house in case Fanny should be in the front room. He always took the same walk, although the time varied, and always he heaved a sigh as he passed the house without seeing any one of the Lockery family.

The idea came to him one night that to explain to Fanny would be still better than explaining to Locritus; but the idea of explaining to Fanny put him in mind of the need for rehearsal, and his speeches grew to such voluminous proportions that each point became a rival in length to an ancient sermon. He knew Fanny would grow impatient, and that would make him incoherent. After all, what he wanted to say to Fanny was the work of a lifetime. The prospect of his explanations was far from encouraging to Fanny, who was promised a lifetime of torment. Dickers always felt passionate as he passed the house; he felt that if deeds of valour were now sufficient to win the hands of fair ladies, he would have conquered without difficulty. Even then, some explanation would be required. What was the value of an explanation?

"No, no; damn it!" said Dickers. "Action. British characteristic is action. Young Charley may say it's sentimentality, and bragging, and all the dreamy muddle of things he imagines it is. But I'm English; I do things

with my fists—at least, I should do them so if I had the chance. You don't get a chance nowadays: even horses don't run away as a matter of course."

He pictured himself rescuing Fanny so, holding the terrified horse, which stamped about his feet and cast glances from furious eyes at the heroic rescuer; heard the tense tone in which he told Fanny to "Get out," mingling gentleness with decision, encouragement with peremptoriness. And Fanny scrambling from the dog-cart, and holding his arm, and looking up at him: "How can I ever thank you?" All these things swam before his eyes. He would give the briefest explanation in the world, "For you I would do anything."

And then Dickers would awake to find the dark trees mocking him drearily, with their slow, derisive movements, which seemed to ask in bitter irony: "Who's got no imagination? Who's got no genuine feeling?"

One evening he thought he would go to see his acquaintance, Robert Barlow, at that familiar public house in which they had met before, where, snug in the private bar, to the lilt of clashing glasses and plunging levers, and the grubble-grubble of men talking, they could discuss the things near Barlow's heart. Dickers felt, complacently, that he had pierced the bubble, that Barlow was a mass of talk loosely strung together into the shape and seeming of a man. He had lost fear of consequences, certainly lost all respect for his would-be confederate, and now looked upon the affair as a sordid spree. If he could have withdrawn, secure in the knowledge of events,

he might have done so, if it had not been that he looked to defeat Mallows. Without any instinctive love of humanity Dickers agreed with the person in the play who said, "Damn anything that's low!" and "low," in modern slang, he certainly felt Mallows's plan to be. Thus, it was in an unusual temper that he walked from his office, down the crowded Strand, and into the private bar, swinging the door wide as he entered and calling for refreshment to destroy the time between his own entrance and that of Barlow. He stared about him as he sat sipping the liquor, until, the bar being empty, the barmaid caught his eye and smiled pleasantly.

"Mr. Barlow'll be here presently," she vouchsafed. "Nice day it's been, hasn't it?"

"Beautiful," said Dickers, importing enthusiasm into his voice. "Very fine. I dare say you don't see much of it."

"No. Things are pretty quiet, though."

Finding him barren of conversation, she moved away, humming faintly. He watched her idly, wondering if it was here that Mr. Barlow's adored had at one time belonged, before her memorable and ill-advised marriage. Other customers came in, and the bar grew slightly festive, with men saying, "D'ye see," and "I told him," and making inquiries about business, and retailing conversations with others. Dickers began to feel rather bored; the dark ceiling had, it seemed, nothing to say to him, and an attempt to listen to three simultaneous conversations ended in confusion. He was in process of regretting that he had come at all when Barlow entered.

The cheery expression on the newcomer's face deepened into a grin at sight of his acquaintance.

"Hello, Jones," he cried, "you're looking happy."

"I've been waiting," Dickers explained. "Makes you happy to do that."

"You should have talked to Rosie," Barlow said. "Not that she's like the one they had here before—I've told you about her marrying Pipkins?"

"You certainly have," Dickers assured him confidently. "She must have been what you call an 'out-and-outer,' eh?"

"Rather. Rosie—Rosie dear! Naughty little puss to keep Uncle Barlow waitin'. Oh! He's given you a flower, has he? . . . I can't 'low that, you know. Oh, but I shan't get along! Show me the man! Now, now, no fibs, Rosie. *You* never gathered that rose." He whispered his order in hoarse tones, being mightily humorous and teasing. Then, with an abrupt change from badinage to sober jollity, upon which he prided himself, Barlow turned to Dickers.

"Jones, my boy, I reckon we're in a fair way to make a bit. I've been seein' a man. S-sh! on the strict Q. T. I've been talkin' to a feller that knows our lay. He says he can give us an order for a hundred gross of those little gimcracks at eleven and three the gross, with a chance of something big to follow. See, it's like this. . . ." He looked over his shoulder. "I don't want the guv'nor to know. So I thought you and me . . . d'you follow me?"

Dickers wagged his criminal head in the most por-

tentous manner. A man came to the table at which they sat, and lighted his pipe from a match in the stand. He stood there for a moment, puffing slowly, and put a stop to any further explanatory discourse from Barlow. Dickers was considerably relieved. He did not know, and did not want to know, in what way he and Barlow might work a deal together: his whole interest in the scheme lay in the desire to foil Mallows. That had animated him from the start; any diversion from the plain track of his scheme was an irritation that he would have preferred to brush aside or ignore entirely. Yet, in the present state of things, he could not quarrel with Barlow, could only nod meaningly and light his pipe, blowing therefrom clouds of enveloping smoke.

As the smoke spread and joined the smoke which already made the ceiling invisible to his eyes, Dickers stared upward and wondered if it were sacrilege to think of Fanny in such surroundings. Sacrilege or not, he seemed to feel her eyes looking at him; he thought he heard her soft voice saying, "I shouldn't like Tom to be mixed up in anything disreputable or dishonourable." Then he fell to considering whether Fanny would have used the phrase "mixed up"; she was rather disinclined to use catch or slang phrases—he had thought her sometimes a little pedantic. But what nonsense! Had he not the testimony of his ears—hadn't he heard her own voice speaking just at that moment? Yes, but didn't he know, deep in his English common-sensical heart, that Fanny had not said it? Didn't he fear she would never say it?

"I don't want to flatter," Barlow said drily. "I hate flattery myself. But if you ain't the liveliest adjectival feller I ever came across, may I be called a fool." He gazed with mock admiration at Dickers, who looked back at him coldly and then took a further sip of his ale.

"I was thinking," Dickers said darkly.

"Ah——" said Barlow in commiseration. "I used to do that sort of thing myself. It don't pay, my boy. You'd better take what's offered. Now, as I was saying a few minutes ago—before you did your bit of thinkin' . . ."

He paused and looked at the door; Dickers did likewise, and involuntarily squared his shoulders, feeling the blood rise slowly to his face. For in the doorway, peering through the smoke, past the dim lights, into the farthest recess where they sat, stood Mallows.

For the bare fraction of a minute none of the three men spoke; then Barlow, still cheery, beckoned to Mallows and turned in explanation to Dickers.

"My partner, Mallows," he said. "Now we can have a real good chat. Not a word about that order."

Mallows came forward. Barlow rose and shook him by the hand. Mallows did not look at him, but past his elbow, at Dickers, who sat apparently unconcerned, fingering his nearly empty glass of ale with a hand that trembled slightly.

"This is——" Barlow began,

"Hello, Dickers!" Mallows said. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"How are you?" Dickers asked, with an air of impassivity.

"Dickers!" Barlow muttered.

"What are you going to have?" Mallows demanded, with a comprehensive glance. "Buck up! You're both finished. How on earth did you two get to know each other?"

There was a tinge of uneasiness in his expression; Barlow was such a talker, and even a hint might bring Dickers into some knowledge of their business.

"Why, I told you——" Barlow began.

"We met one day a-walking," Dickers explained, enjoying the position, with his nerves quivering and his head seeming to spin.

"This is Jones!" Barlow finished.

"What in hell's name——?" Mallows commenced, his face gray with passion and fear and his shifty eyes steady for an instant.

"That's *your* naming, not mine," Dickers said with dry tongue.

Barlow looked down at him, still standing.

"What is your name?" he asked unsteadily.

"I told you Thomas," Dickers said.

"Oh, you fool, you fool!" Mallows said in a whisper to Barlow. "You've made a pretty mess of it!" His hand was shaking.

"But I asked you . . . You told a lie. Your name's not Thomas," Barlow blustered, all frantic anxiety to clear himself from blame, his coward nature shrinking and crying within him like a whipped child.

"Lies are in the nature of things," Dickers said, with grim humour.

"Well, what's *your* game, anyway?" Mallows interposed abruptly, with an expression so evil that Dickers clenched his fist beneath the table.

"You said your name was Thomas," Barlow went on.

"Oh, shut your mouth!" Mallows muttered savagely.

Their eager voices had attracted the attention of those around, who were looking intently upon the three-cornered discussion. One of them even came nearer, and in his interest leaned upon the mantelpiece and watched the faces of the three. Mallows noticed the man, and although he was beside himself with anger he went to the bar and called for whisky for all three. By the time these were brought the bar was empty. Barlow had by this time seated himself, but Mallows remained standing, fidgeting from one foot to the other, and starting to speak and apparently recasting his remark in such a hurry that it left him tongue-tied.

"I don't know what you think you're playing at, Dickers," he began, with an attempt to bluster that was half restrained because he did not know what Dickers might do, and also because he was not sure what had passed between the other two at their previous interviews.

"Do you expect me to say?" Dickers asked, gaining confidence and grinning.

"As a business man—between business men," Mal-

lows corrected himself. "I don't see you've any call to mix yourself in my affairs."

"That's for me to decide," Dickers suggested.

"Not at all, not at all!" Mallows said savagely. "It's not a decent thing. You've no business—to come prying and spying into things that don't concern you. I don't do it to you."

"How do I know that?" Dickers asked suddenly.

"Well, I don't. You've got my word."

Mallows mentioned his honour with a readiness born of constant contemplation. He was touchy about his word.

"Hum. Yes," Dickers said.

All this time Barlow had been sitting quiet, looking from one to the other in a state of bewilderment.

"But you said your name was Thomas," he protested.

"So it is," Dickers replied. "Thomas—Christian name. Same as Robert. I told you the truth. I always do. Same as Mallows here."

"Look here," Mallows commenced, "you're having a very fine game on your own, my boy, but you'd better take care."

"You want to know where we stand," Dickers said bluntly. Mallows gave him a sharp glance, his eyes gleaming. "Now, I don't like beating about the bush. You want to know how much I know, eh?"

"Depends on what there is to know," Mallows said, drinking after the speech and looking down at Dickers, his mouth trembling and his face still thin and gray with fear.

"Well, you're the best judge," Dickers told him.

"Oh, but I say, Jones!" Barlow broke in. "After all I've said. To round on us like this——"

"S'sh, you fool!" Mallows cried angrily.

"Poor chap can't help himself," Dickers explained. "You needn't bully him. You needn't try to bully me either."

"Who's trying?"

"I said you need *not* try," Dickers retorted, at Mallows's interjection. "Your friend here is a very fine fellow. But you neither of you play the game as Englishmen play it. Not square."

"What d'you mean?" Mallows said quietly, white to the lips with craven fear.

"Is it English to go sneaking round?" Barlow put in.

"I believe I know all about you," Dickers assured Mallows, his fists ready doubled under the table in case of emergency.

Mallows laughed suddenly.

"That's alarming," he sneered. "What a lot you must know."

"And what's more," Dickers went on, gradually losing his self-control and becoming excited, the blood flaring up in his cheeks, "what's more, I'm going to see you damned before I let you do what you're planning!"

"Oh-ho!" Mallows said, taking up the point. "Well, how are you going to do that, my buck?"

"No business of his!" put in Barlow in a bridling tone.

"You're a fool, young man!" Dickers said kindly.

"Call me a fool?" Barlow muttered, rising.

"Sit down, you fool!" Mallows said, confirming Dickers's estimate. "How are you going to stop us? This is very interesting." He was trembling from head to foot.

"You're in as big a funk," Dickers explained, although he was trembling also, "as ever I saw a man. It's no good brazening with me, Mallows. I know your game. I'm not a fool."

"Oh!" sneered Mallows.

"I'll expose you," Dickers went on. "I'll see you're treated properly. We'll see if you're so safe as all that. Don't be too sure."

"Don't talk silly," Mallows said. "You know it's rot. Why, you don't know what you're talking about. Expose us, indeed! Why, you're talking off the top of your head!"

"Called me a fool, he did," Barlow said softly to himself.

"I'll chance it," Dickers answered, and flung the table over, with a great gesture of defiance. Mallows started back with a coward's cry, and the landlord came running out from his parlour.

"Gentlemen!" he cried, aghast at the destruction. "Hi! Alf, Jim, you're wanted, quick!" He climbed over the bar.

"Nice thing to do!" he said.

"Go to hell!" Dickers told him, as angry as he could be.

"Who's the fool?" Barlow asked loudly. "I'll take any money."

"You'll pay for my glasses," the landlord said.

By this time Alf and Jim were in the bar, waiting instructions. Mallows winked at the landlord, although he was shaking with fear and perspiring freely with the excitement and heat of the moment.

"If you want to fight——" Dickers said fiercely.

There was a rush, a confused frantic scuffle, in which arms whirled and broken glass crunched startlingly. Tumblers rattled and steps came near. Angry oaths were thick and fast as the blows they accompanied. Mallows staggered to the door, and Barlow followed him. In spite of his struggles Dickers was borne forth and thrown stumbling several feet away from the house. He rose, to meet the keen eye of a policeman. The humour of the situation struck him suddenly.

"Well, I'm—jiggered!" he said, laughing.

"You'd better go home," said the policeman, who saw that Dickers was no weakling.

"That's all right," Dickers said. "Took five of 'em to get me out of that bar. Not bad going that, eh?"

"What's the row?" the policeman asked, while the ejectors returned to their less strenuous duties inside.

Dickers picked up his hat, which had rolled upon the pavement, and tried to straighten his collar.

"Had a row with a couple of fellows inside," he explained. "Oh, I'm sober enough, I can tell you."

"See you are," the policeman assured him.

"Well, good-night," Dickers said. "And thank you.

They'll be sneaking out in a few minutes. I shan't wait."

Then he went off, and as he walked the blood trembled and sang in his veins, and his eyes shone, and his swollen mouth opened in a large smile.

"Better now," Dickers muttered. "But if I had Mallows's neck between my hands . . ."

The smile broadened, but a dark expression came into his eyes. Perhaps Mallows was lucky in his several protectors.

CHAPTER XXII

THE REBEL AND THE HOAX

Mrs. Lockery looked at her daughter with cold disdain. She saw no sweetness in Fanny's face, only the expression of one of those Patient Grissils whom she so despised.

"Must you dust this room now?" she said.

"I'm sorry; I didn't know you'd mind," Fanny said timidly. "I didn't think I should disturb you if I did it quietly."

"If you thought a little more . . . " Mrs. Lockery said.

Fanny brooded for a moment. Then she turned.

"Why are you always so irritable with me?" she asked abruptly.

Her mother looked up from her writing with a brow "attired in frowns."

"Don't be impertinent," she said.

"It's all very well, Mother," Fanny cried, with a sudden spirit, "to try and frighten me. But now I'm twenty-one I think you might try to understand I'm a woman, with a woman's mind."

"You'd better dust some other room," her mother

said. "I'm very busy, and I don't want to be disturbed."

"I don't see why you can't answer my question," Fanny persisted. "Unless, of course, you can't even justify yourself."

"I told you not to be impertinent. You don't realize that you must not impute motives or reasons which could only exist in your own head—a girl's head, full of story-book notions. You'd far better read and not bother me."

"I don't impute anything," Fanny said warmly; "I feel you hate and despise me. Naturally, I resent it. Could I do anything else?"

"You might do your dusting," her mother said drily. "Even that is better than your argumentation."

Fanny went out of the room flushing and crying, indignant that her mother should treat her so contemptuously. At the last moment she turned and went back, her duster held tightly in both hands.

"At least, you might practice what you preach," she cried.

"I'm too old, my dear," her mother answered. "And you'll be a little drudge to the end of the chapter."

"It's you who've made me so," Fanny sobbed. "You've always bullied me and kept me in subjection, as though I were a menial. You talk about women being women; and you've tried all your life to crush me, to look on me as worthless. I know I'm not worthless—others know it."

She ran out of the room and soothed herself by go-

ing down the garden, all bright with sunshine and flowering with the blooms of early summer. On every side she found comfort, in the sound of bees and flies, the scent of the sweet flowers, the light touch of the breeze. And at the foot of the garden she could see an old cow, looking through a great hole in the paling with soft, languorous eyes that spoke of patience, unswerving, ineradicable.

"Ah, but you haven't the provocation," she cried, gently rubbing the cow's broad face and sighing as she spoke. "You've only the flies that sting you in hot summer. But, oh, Molly, if you only knew what I suffer! Charley says I don't grow up, and Mother sneers, and Father doesn't come back. I'm so unhappy, Molly. Nobody understands me. I don't believe you do, for all your sympathy. You just like to go on from day to day, walking from byre to meadow, and eating and basking. But you know girls can't do that. They're the most unfortunate, melancholy beings in existence. I can assure you, Molly, every word is true. Mother's been so cruel to me."

Molly looked at her with gentle, placid eyes; her under jaw moved rhythmically from side to side, and her tail flung this way and that to ward off the flies that sought her company.

"I love you, Molly, but you've nothing to give me," Fanny said.

Molly turned slowly away, to the sweeter grass farther from the paling, and Fanny sang a little as

she moved about the garden, watching the gradual progress of her flowers.

In the evening, when Mrs. Lockery was out, and Locritus sitting at his tea, Fanny spoke to him several times without disturbing his preoccupation. When at last she made him realize that she was speaking she gave the story of the encounter of the afternoon.

"Charley dear, I can't stand it much longer," she said.

"What shall you do?" he asked, wilfully or not oblivious to the fact that she was in deadly earnest.

"I don't know what to do. Oh, don't laugh at me."

"Don't you exaggerate, Fan? Perhaps she was dotty about something."

"It's always so—always. You don't see her," Fanny said.

"I don't know what to say. There's nothing to be done."

"You always say, 'Bear it'; but, Charley, I can't. I go on and get so miserable—oh, I know you don't believe I'm miserable; you think because you see me happy I'm always so. It's only because you're at home."

"Think of me during the day."

"You're so insubstantial then. I've seen you faintly so for years."

"Well, I can't think of a way out," he told her frankly.

"I might marry," Fanny said cautiously, but a little red.

Locritus crowed and pretended to choke in his tea-cup.

"Or, Charley, you and I might go and live somewhere. I'd keep house so beautifully."

He looked at her in a dream, as though he were really thinking of the suggestion as a possible solution.

"It's not as bad as all that," he objected.

"It's worse. I shall never grow up if I stay."

"I would have you—oh, well, there's Father to be thought of."

Fanny was checked. She loved her father dearly, and she knew he loved her as well; she saw him coming to a house bereft.

"I wish he'd come," she said slowly.

"You see, it isn't possible. So dry your tears, and cease your fears, and fill for me the cup that cheers," Locritus said, to introduce a lighter tone.

"You always laugh at me," Fanny said reproachfully, "always."

"I'm not overjoyous myself just at this moment," Locritus told her. "I feel as though things were suddenly going to bust up and go to pot."

"Do you really? Poor old Charley!"

"Oh, I don't want your sympathy," he said with mock brusqueness. "Did Molly call this afternoon?"

"I went and talked to her over the paling. She didn't say anything."

"Wise beast. Mother's gone to meeting, I suppose."

"Yes, to preach the recognition of every woman as

an individual," Fanny said bitterly. "What she denies her daughter."

"S-sh, s-sh! Don't blaspheme," Locritus admonished, hardly listening. Not only did he feel ill, but he was worried. He ate mechanically.

"If Father doesn't come soon I shall do something desperate," Fanny assured him passionately. "I know it's no use talking to you. You simply say, 'Hush,' and let things slide. That's because you're a man. I'm a woman, and restless."

And that night Fanny, renewing her bitter thoughts, lay for hours, dry-eyed and tossing, while the window blind rattled gently, and the pleasant breeze came in at the open window, fresh from miles of wide country.

Now Locritus had more than one worry busy in his mind, yet he slept soundly when he laid his head upon the kindly pillow. Not only had he the consciousness of ten pounds still owing to Mallows, which was a crippling thought, but Kitty would on no account give him the name for which he had asked. And now a third source of anxiety had come along. It had happened in the simplest way, and was in itself trivial and unimportant; yet for a reason that agitated his feelings, although it had long since been settled in his mind, the simple thing was like to cause more unrest than he could view with comfort.

During the morning Locritus had found his work pleasant and easy—for once. Mr. Albert was on holiday for the day, Miss Dilkes had been subdued, the

traveller was out, and Margaret had received another letter from Jenny, containing messages for Locritus.

"She sends you her best regards," Margaret explained, in answer to a question from him; "I think she's much happier since Whitsun. And she's getting quite fat. She says she's much heavier, in this letter. She explains that's why the letter's dull, and puts it all down to her increasing solidity."

"Do you think she'll be well enough to come back in the autumn," Locritus asked, "or will she stay over to the New Year?"

"It all depends," Margaret said. "I think she is going on well, though. Good old Jenny! She's been awfully brave."

"The bravery's not hers alone," Locritus said. "Are we not all heroes and heroines, doing gaily . . ."

Margaret left him at this distressing commencement and would not return, although he whistled an air in an aggravating way that never failed to produce a protest from Fanny. Margaret, he knew, was of different mettle from Fanny: sterner, he thought, but could not be sure.

He killed time by writing an execrable poem, and wasted some of his employer's stationery by using it as paper for notes on the genesis of the English Revolution—a subject which was engaging his serious attention at the time. Having written the heads of his inquiries as to current politics, religion, internal economy, and so forth, Locritus found his knowledge insufficient to produce satisfactory notes and fell into aggressive generalizations. These generalizations he subse-

quently found to be self-contradictory and therefore of little value. A sonnet on Sir Harry Vane pleased him: it had a certain ring. How very aimless he had become, Locritus thought, how piffling were his employments, his occupation. In a sudden disgust he tore up his notes, and his two poems, and threw them into the waste-paper basket with a jerk of irritation.

"Naughty temper," said a voice. He looked up and saw that Mr. Frederick had emerged from his room with an unlighted cigarette in his hand. The would-be gallant sauntered across to the door of the small office.

"Pretty futile, this, ain't it?" he said idly, striking a match and puffing. "Have a cigarette?"

"Smoking is not allowed on the premises," said Locritus primly.

"Oh, rot! That side's Turkish—the others are Virginia. Good man! Don't care for the Turks myself. Something unchristian and uncharitable about them."

"They finish sooner, too," Locritus added.

"Pooh! That's an advantage; then you have another."

"Entirely a question of income."

"True," said Mr. Frederick. He went along to the typists' office; Locritus heard him say, "Well, ladies," and speak in a low tone. Miss Dilkes exclaimed in a loud, ravishing voice, and there was conversation between the three of them that Locritus did not hear. He "found a thing to do," and busied himself at it as though life and death hung upon its completion.

"What on earth's he got to say?" muttered Locritus, pricking up his ears. A murmur only reached them, so he

sank to his task once more. After all, Mr. Frederick dealt in small talk of a very poor description; so perhaps his loquacity had nothing in it.

"Besides," added Locritus, with truth, if without sincerity, "it's none of my business—whether he stays there talking for the rest of the morning."

He heard a jingling or clicking of the chain latchets on the girls' jackets, and knew by that it was time to go to lunch. Yet something made Locritus stay, still busy, with his pen twinkling and writing as diligently as ever busy journalist managed in his most dire need. So much energy did he put into the business that the paper seemed actually to fly beneath the ever-increasing column of written matter, close and neat—yet not so neat, for although the writing of Locritus looked neat it was a mere pretence, an outward show, a prospect view that nearer approach blurred. Margaret went by; he heard her saying:

"It's very good of you, Mr. Frederick."

What was good? Then Miss Dilkes must rise higher and trill in her most well-bred way:

"Oh, it will be charming!"

"So," said Locritus to himself, "they're both in it."

In his heart he would have sold a secret to know why both were grateful. Not that the gratitude of Miss Dilkes was of any value, or even of any interest to him; for Locritus had long scorned that product of the latest fashion papers as a person unworthy even of the faintest curiosity. Nevertheless he wondered that Margaret should thank Mr. Frederick, whose company she had

endured with the exercise of so much fortitude. Perhaps the thanks, the tribute, had been ironical? Yes, but what about Miss Dilkes? True; it must be sincere. Well, and if it was? Could Margaret thank none but himself?

"You're a peculiar kind of blankety idiot, Charles, my son," said Locritus, in friendly self-paternity.

Mr. Frederick came back along the passage, with a fresh cigarette in his mouth rolling from side to side by aid of his supple tongue.

"You look a pretty ineffective owl this morning," he told Locritus gaily. "Why don't you stop in bed for a week?"

"I've not long had my Whitsun holiday," Locritus said; "and your kind father has no reason to set up as a charitable institution."

"Wish he'd have the charity not to come down here every day of the week. I hate the look of the place. Let Albert grub in the hovel for himself. If the old man clears out, you don't see me down here more than once a week—I tell *you*. There's something better than coming in here and kicking your heels every day and all day."

"Surely; you're hardly done by," Locritus agreed.

"Don't be saucy, you young blackguard! Tell me, don't you think the two girls in that box along there are pretty smart?"

"Miss Dilkes has a pretty wit, it seems," Locritus said. "I hear her merry laughter chime with yours."

"Oh, she's got a long tongue. She's smart, though. I

like a smart girl. One with plenty of 'go' in her, you know."

"I see you've got taste." Locritus sneered covertly.

"Well, I haven't knocked about without learning a thing or two. They're both of them nice young things. . . . Now, not a word, young Lockery." He lowered his voice, and grinned away in the most complacent style. "I've got a big hoax on. You mustn't breathe a word to a soul. Did you hear what I was saying just now? . . . No? Well, I didn't want you to; but now I'll tell you. I went along and asked them if they could use two upper-circle tickets for the Thespian Theatre tomorrow night. Just been disappointed, so much obliged —so on. Sorry they weren't better seats, but offer them in all humility. That sort of thing. Seen the play four times myself—could recommend it. Well, in they walks, ready as herrings. Dilkes as pleased as Judy to think she's going to have a chance of wearin' her white silk blouse with the blue ribbons and what not. Miss Marsden not quite so gushing, but—as your humble cracked up the play—didn't mind going with Florrie Dilkes. So it's all arranged, and they're as happy as can be. Bless their dear little innocent hearts! So fresh and confiding."

"And *aren't* there any tickets?" asked Locritus, greatly mystified, and wondering whither this lengthy explanation led.

"Yes—I handed them over on the nail, like a kind boy," Mr. Frederick said, enjoying his companion's unsatisfied curiosity.

"But you said there was a hoax. As far as you've gone you have been a kind boy," Locritus assured him. "Where does the hoax come in?"

"Why, it's like this: I said I'd been disappointed and the tickets thrown upon my hands."

"Well? A pardonable lie," Locritus said, in his rôle of man-of-the-world. "I could imagine myself doing that with gusto."

"But the joke is," Mr. Frederick went on with increasing gaiety that for a moment prevented him altogether from speaking—"the joke is, my son, that there are going to be larks to-morrow evening! When the girls get to the theatre they'll go in—that's all right. But in the middle of the overture Albert and I stray in."

He chuckled with glee at his ingenuity, and Locritus gave him a stony glance.

"Well?" he said.

"And take our seats on either side of the fair damsels."

"That'll be very jolly for you."

"Rather. I reckon we shall have a rare time. By gum, I'm looking forward to it as though I was a snivelling, idiotic schoolboy again. It's one of those simple plans that put the nail right into the wall."

"Miss Dilkes will have a rare time," Locritus said.

"So shall I," Frederick said significantly. "Bet I get a kiss before the evening's over."

"You look out," Locritus told him; "you'll have Albert on your track. He won't allow you to poach."

"Bertie? Why, he'll have Dilkes: she's part of the

contract," Mr. Frederick cried, in a tone of wondrous explanation.

A dull pain shot through Locritus's heart. Strange he should have been so wofully stupid. Frederick had talked so freely with Miss Dilkes that he had never doubted she was to be his companion; and in thinking of Albert and Margaret he had felt no fear. It was different now, and he could hardly grin in response to Frederick's great slap on the back.

CHAPTER XXIII

PRETTY FANNY'S WAY

THE three home-staying members of the Lockery family breakfasted together the next morning, very politely, because none of them was in a very good or pleasant frame of mind. Over his toast Locritus turned to Fanny.

"I shall be late to-night," he said.

"Oh, so shall I," Mrs. Lockery supplemented. "I'm going out this morning, and shan't be back until teatime. Then, after tea, I'm going out for the evening."

Nobody made any comment upon this speech: the two younger ones were used to such absences as these. Locritus was nevertheless penitent: after breakfast he spoke aside to his sister.

"I'm awfully sorry about to-night, Fan. You know I generally manage to be at home when she's away. This is very important, or I'd slither out of it."

"It's all right," Fanny expostulated. "I shan't be lonely."

"Couldn't you—I suppose you wouldn't go to see Mrs. Dickers? I'd call for you on my way home; she stays up very late as a rule, I know, reading her abominable works of fiction."

Fanny refused decidedly. She felt that Mrs. Dickers was at the present moment one with whom conversation would not be enjoyable. Her mind was in too great a ferment to deal readily with the ailments of Mrs. Dickers, and these, she was sure, would be the chief topic of discourse if she went to call. Besides, she was not overanxious to see Thomas Dickers, for she remembered his disapproval, even his shocked face, at the announcement that she had awakened to a sense of her own importance. No! Home in solitude was apparently better than away in boredom.

"I'll get home as quick as I can; but it may be late. You won't wait up?"

Fanny promised solemnly, and they separated. Locritus had been catching an earlier train since his illness, because he had taken it into his head that wholesome discipline was what he most needed. Accordingly, he had been eating and sleeping less, and working hard at the history of the Stuart kings and their opponents. Locritus had even at this stage passed into the third degree of regard for Carlyle's Cromwell. He had started with delighted admiration of the splendid colour of the portrait; had proceeded with a lengthy sneer at the inaccuracies and mistaken interpretations which he found by comparison with contemporary records; and was now slowly returning to a great admiration for the author, tempered by a scientific mistrust of everything he said. As these processes were the result of considerable labour they may be taken as conclusive proofs of the assertion that Locritus was really taking something seriously for

once in his life. He had even prepared the heads of a great and superfluous work on the Protector.

Now came this theatre-going business that disturbed him. What should he do? To let it go on without a word was, he felt, rather unfair to Margaret; to tell her was to betray a confidence.

"Compromise," Locritus told himself. But how to compromise was a question of far greater difficulty of settlement than the actual resolution. It was impossible to hocus either Frederick or Margaret—at least, that method was not highly recommended, because it had consequences. Frederick was not a man to be bribed: besides, Locritus did not want to be branded as a pious person with no eye for sport. He felt that in Frederick's sphere such a piece of impertinence as the young man proposed would have been regarded as a quite normal exploit; and equally that to Margaret's mind the plan would be unpleasant and discomforting. To warn her in vague terms would be worse than useless and more discreditable than any other way.

"The only thing I can see," said Locritus, "is to go myself." And this he was purposing to do: a decision that had led to his advising Fanny that he could not be home until late. As soon as the box office was open he telephoned; the seat they offered in the back row, near one of the exits, was just what he wanted. In his lunch time he went along to the theatre and made assurance doubly sure by gaining possession of the ticket.

During the morning Margaret told him of the expedition.

"Did you hear Mr. Frederick giving Miss Dilkes and me tickets for to-night's performance of *The Rose of Drell?*" she asked. "He had told me before that it was very much worth seeing."

"Some tinny musical comedy," Locritus said, dissembling. "With twenty authors and sylphlike heroines who can't act."

"I'll tell you to-morrow," Margaret said. "It's very good of Mr. Frederick, don't you think?"

Locritus muttered that he supposed it was, that he personally would prefer to give the tickets away if he had to choose between that and seeing the performance.

"You're not very gracious this morning," Margaret told him reprovingly. "Does it seem to you I did wrong in taking the ticket? I'm going with Miss Dilkes, you know."

There was a directness in her glance that sent Locritus's eyes scurrying to his letters for very cowardliness.

"I don't see how you could have refused it," he said.

"Then I wonder what you mean," Margaret went on musingly.

"I have a natural Methodistical distrust of theatres," he prevaricated. She scorned him openly for the lie and decided that she would try to enjoy the play in spite of his croakings as to the many cooks who had made it. For her part, Miss Dilkes was in great delight at the prospect. But then Miss Dilkes had heard many times from Albert that the play was the most charming thing

in the West End. Had she known of the plan her pleasure would have been doubled.

The day seemed long to everybody concerned in the plot: Mr. Frederick strolled out of his father's office many times, and as frequently strolled in again without showing that any purpose had driven him to the action. Locritus kicked under his desk all day in a terribly bad temper, was short with Albert, ignored Frederick, and was painfully intent on being unconcerned with Margaret. She thought his conduct both unusual and funny, and in saying good-night could not forbear a word of comment that had burned on her lips all the afternoon. Miss Dilkes was still arranging her hat, and afterward buttoning her gloves, and subsequently tying and untying some little bows at her neck, which set in a crude way that made her blood boil.

"You've been very bearish all day," Margaret told Locritus. He looked up at her with sombre eyes, half extremely serious, half supersolemn.

"I'm reflecting upon the frivolity and love of frivolity which I find in womankind," he said.

"Myself being the typical instance?" Margaret asked.

"When one has so wide a feminine acquaintance . . ." Locritus replied, leaving the result to be inferred.

"You must view the spectacle with awe in your heart," she returned, to be nonsensical in his own vein—"so impervious to temptation as you are."

"Something of sadness," Locritus admitted.

"I shall be all right," Margaret said suddenly, "if that's what you mean."

Locritus flushed: she could not see his right fist clenched.

"I have no doubt of that," he said quietly.

Later on, seated in the back row of the upper circle, concealed behind a paper in case of an upward glance from either of the two girls, Locritus saw them in the middle of the second row. He noticed with pleasure that Margaret was not "fine," as was Miss Dilkes. "That girl" had on her new silk blouse, had her hair done differently, and looked, he decided, as though she had been rigged out for the occasion. The overture commenced; he saw Margaret point out to Miss Dilkes that a seat was vacant on either side of them. A quick glance upward from her almost caught him, and he could have imagined the dawn of suspicion in her expression. As the overture concluded, tinny as he had expected, the lights were slowly lowered, and he saw Frederick and Albert going down the steps. Did Margaret start? He could not be sure; but he noticed Miss Dilkes radiant when the last light was extinguished, and the figures became lost as the orchestra played the prelude to the opening chorus. What protest was made—if any—he did not know; but he was quite certain that nobody left suddenly, and looked as nearly as he could remember at where Margaret had been sitting, to make quite sure as soon as the act was finished and the lights once more

blazed forth to show a moving mass of people, all chattering and nodding to each other in their talk. Margaret was still there: he fancied her head was kept slightly averted, and Frederick was evidently trying to explain or to interest her. What a babble there was! Locritus looked round at the people near him, heard them saying everybody was sweet or sweetly pretty, and that the tenor used to have a splendid voice but that he had lost it—they had noticed it gone first in *The Dancing Geranium*—and the scene had been exquisite. Then a girl was planning a holiday trip with her sweetheart, and two men were discussing Ibsen in a drivelling way that showed they knew nothing about him.

"Really," exclaimed Locritus, thoroughly incensed, "the audience is worse than the performance!" But he said it fiercely without opening his lips, so that nobody knew of the tumult that was raging in his heart.

What had happened below was that Margaret had felt Frederick coming and turned suddenly. He had smiled gaily and demanded applause for an excellent joke. Margaret had answered in a low voice that it was rather a mean trick, and had watched the play. At the close of the act Frederick had expostulated with her, had said it was all fun, asked whether she couldn't take a joke. Margaret had answered again that it seemed to her dishonest to bring a faked story of disappointment and thus draw her into a thing for which she had no liking. He seemed abashed and she thought he had perhaps been reproved sufficiently, so she accepted a choco-

late from a box handed by Miss Dilkes, who was enjoying herself in the most fantastic way. Her face was perpetually smiling, her arms perpetually moving, from shoulder to wrist. Albert was making small, thin jokes, at which she laughed continuously.

"What a crew!" said Margaret to herself, in an overpowering contempt.

After the play was over, Locritus slipped out before anybody else and placed himself in a position from which he thought he could obtain a good view of all those who left the theatre, in spite of carriages and cabs and the confusion which always attends the dispersal of an audience. He saw Albert and Miss Dilkes come out and wait for the others. All four then proceeded up a side street which was supposed to lead quickly to the Strand. Locritus noticed Albert seize the arm of his companion, run with her across the street, and then lost sight of that pair. From the two others he never removed his eyes. They proceeded up the street until Margaret apparently spoke to Miss Dilkes, and, receiving no answer, stopped.

"Where have they gone?" Margaret asked, surprised.

"I don't know," said Frederick. "Gone off on their own, I suppose. Look here, let us go and have supper somewhere."

"I'd rather not, Mr. Frederick," Margaret answered steadily.

"Oh, come, do! Why not?"

"I'd prefer to go straight home."

"But you must have something to eat."

"I didn't expect your company, and I'd rather go home."

Frederick seemed much dashed.

"But I'd relied on your coming," he protested. "Oh, well"—at her silence—"I'll call a cab. But you *are* a silly little girl!"

Margaret felt inclined to laugh, but she kept serious.

"I don't want to go in a cab," she said stubbornly. "I'm very grateful to you for giving me the chance of seeing the play, but you know I shouldn't have gone if I'd known this would be the result. I don't want to be rude, but I'd rather go home alone, my own way. Good-night, Mr. Frederick."

"Oh, but, Margaret," he cried, "this is too bad!"

She thought him still impertinent, and drew off with an indignant glance. Then he came forward and caught her arm.

"You're coming to have some supper with me," he said, "and then I'm going to see you home. You don't think I'd let a pretty girl like you go home alone at this time of night, Margaret?"

Margaret tried to shake his hand away, but as it was forced from her arm he put his own arm round her waist. The panting Locritus, finding here the opportunity he had awaited, rushed up and struck Frederick's elbow with his fist, just hard enough to make him relinquish his grasp of Margaret.

"No liberties," said Locritus, still breathing hard from

his run, and his heart beating a little fast with excitement, "young man."

Frederick looked at him with open mouth, and Margaret with shining eyes.

"This is a damned sell!" Frederick said blusteringly. "You've no business to interfere here, Lockery. It's a most confounded piece of impertinence."

"Don't talk rot!" Locritus interrupted. "I feel mean in interfering, but you mustn't do that, you know."

"I didn't think it of you!" Frederick exclaimed. "But you needn't think I accept it, Lockery, because I don't."

"You needn't be a fool," Locritus answered coolly. "I'll see Miss Marsden home. You've had your theatre trip. That's all you had a right to plan."

All this time Margaret had been looking from one to the other without any attempt to interrupt. Now she spoke.

"Yes, Mr. Frederick. Mr. Lockery will see me on my way. I shall be quite safe. You may have your supper." It was a malicious touch given for Locritus's sake, although she was not as unmoved as the words sounded. She could have thanked Locritus on her knees for coming up at the critical moment.

"I tell you I won't stand it!" Frederick said, loud and threatening. He held his fist up. Locritus clenched his hands in readiness.

"Don't fight!" Margaret cried suddenly, and the words faded on her lips.

Frederick struck Locritus on the shoulder, a blow that sent him back several steps before he could recover

his balance. Margaret gave a sharp cry, and then saw Frederick lying on his back with his hat rolling daintily along the road.

"You toad!" he said as he got up.

"Oh, no!" Locritus exclaimed, in real protest. "You *did* insist." Then Frederick walked away from them without a word, and Margaret started to walk in the other direction.

"Come along," she said quickly. "Do come now!"

Locritus followed her.

"It wasn't serious," he said; "he's only disappointed. I feel I did rather a shabby thing coming at all—but what else could I do?"

Margaret laughed, yet the laugh was short and abruptly ended.

"It's all very well for you," she said.

They walked to Charing Cross, and Locritus insisted on going with her on the omnibus. Margaret gave in with a little hesitation.

"Well, did you enjoy the play?" Locritus asked.

"Not much," she admitted. "Were you there?"

"Yes, watching."

"It was very good of you."

"If there had been an easier way," Locritus said ungraciously, "I should have taken that. I thought I ought to play the part of Nemesis."

"But how did you know he would be there?"

"He told me himself," Locritus explained. "That's what tied my hands. That's why I was ashamed and why he felt so sore."

"You're overscrupulous: *he* wasn't."

"The cases are not quite similar," Locritus returned, with a curious ring in his voice.

They did not speak any more for some time.

"Do you think Frederick may make a row?" Locritus asked—"I mean, at the office?"

"Do you?" said Margaret. The idea came with horrid swiftness.

"Albert may be a little tyrannical," Locritus suggested shrewdly. "No, I don't think so. Frederick's not a bad chap. He'll fight shy of both of us for a week, and then he'll be well again. It was his dignity —his vanity—that was hurt. But so long as you tell nobody—don't tell that girl, whatever you do!"

"I won't say a word."

"You must even tell a lie, if need be," Locritus said slowly.

"At all costs it shall be concealed," she vowed.

Locritus went with her almost to the gate of the house in which she lived.

"You'll be late getting home," Margaret said, as they neared the house.

"Quite likely," he admitted, and offered his hand.

"Good-night," said Margaret gently, and raised her eyes. He was looking at her with so remarkable an expression of love and laughter that she withdrew her hand quickly. "You mustn't be late to-morrow," she concluded, her cheeks burning, and burning so that they hurt.

Locritus walked the greater part of the way home, as he very often did, because he found a long solitary walk at night the best possible cure for whimsies and humours. On this night he walked with some irregularity—at times very fast, then very slow, according to mood. For exactly a year—he was willing to laugh at the preciseness of his recollection even while he prized it—Locritus had been in love with Margaret Marsden. He had kept very quiet and tried to give no hint, because he was terrified at the idea of losing her altogether. When Dickers had begged for his sympathy Locritus had taken a secret pleasure in the ironic comments which had hurt himself while they affected Dickers only slightly; he had even tried the plan of pretending he was in love with love. The fear was not of himself; he did not suspect his own sincerity; it was simply that Locritus saw himself a rather shallow and frequently dull person. It was impossible, he argued—the worst possible compliment to Margaret—to imagine that she could ever fancy him anything but an insincere fool. He thought she knew his failings too intimately ever to be misled into a ridiculous regard for them; and he had watched, with his intuition continuously alert and sensitive in its probing, all her aversion from his feelings of a non-neutral order. When he found seriousness creeping into his tone, he knew that Margaret took alarm sooner than he did himself: he knew, too, that friendship with her was only possible upon the most honest terms. All these things had weighed with Locritus, and prevented him from even thinking

in desperate seriousness of asking Margaret whether she really found him different from others—granted the difference would be with herself alone, made by her, and so sustained; and it was only this evening, when she had seemed to expect his help, to take it for granted, and then to shrink into silence, that Locritus had thought the incredible tinged with some faintest colour of credibility.

"Of course it's absurd," he told himself. "Simply her nerves were racked by that fool Frederick. What an ass the man was! Fancy not being able to discriminate as any owl would have done! Frederick, you're a mystery—and a marvel!"

The night had no moon, or it was hid behind clouds, for he saw nothing of it. The road seemed longer than usual, and toward the end it grew so hard to walk upon that Locritus several times almost stumbled as he climbed the hill. He was still thinking of the day's events, of the theatre, the affray, and of Margaret's startled glance, to complete the recollection—and that made him laugh gleefully.

He entered the house very softly and hung his hat upon the stand. Then, on tiptoe, he went into the sitting room. To his surprise his mother was standing there, her cloak and hat still on, her eyes wide and staring.

"Why, Mother!" Locritus cried in alarm; "what's the matter?"

She looked at him with a strange expression that seemed half of anger, half of fear.

"Read this!" she said, holding out a letter, which he had not noticed. Her hand trembled. "Fanny's run away with Mallows!"

"Oh, my God!" Locritus cried. His knees seemed to give way, and he fell into a chair behind him.

CHAPTER XXIV

A NIGHT OF TORMENT

THE letter placed in the hand of Locritus by his mother was quite short. It had no commencement, in the sense that it was addressed to nobody.

> I cannot bear to stay at home any longer. So I married Mr. Mallows this morning and have gone away. Please, Charley, don't think me mad; you know I could not stand things as they have been.
>
> FANNY.

Locritus put the letter down upon the table without a word of comment. His mother stood there still in her cloak and hat and looked at him.

"Of course, she exaggerates," Mrs. Lockery said dully, without conviction, and without carrying conviction. "Anybody would think I had been cruel to her."

"I think we've both been rather cruel," Locritus said gently. "But why Mallows?—that's what I can't understand. She doesn't know the man—can't know him. Why, she's not seen him more than twice or three times at the most!"

Mrs. Lockery hesitated—she who was always ready in debate.

"He's been here," she said.

"And I've not known?" Locritus asked sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Several times—during the day," she went on, reddening at his tone.

"And you've not been cruel?" he demanded.

"You've no right——" began Mrs. Lockery.

"Oh, we're not apportioning blame," he said. "How many times?"

"I can't tell," she answered defiantly.

Locritus was helpless. First, he was exhausted; secondly, he was confused and bewildered by what had happened. He felt more angry than he had ever been before.

"I think you've sacrificed her," he said unsteadily. "To let that man come here! I didn't think you had that colossal folly. Couldn't you see the man was a rogue?"

"I've nobody to depend on," she said. "You can only blame me when the thing's done. If he's a rogue, why did you bring him here?"

"A caller on business is not an intimate!" he cried. "He always came on business; why should he call otherwise?"

"He called on business always!" Mrs. Lockery exclaimed angrily.

"When he knew I wasn't in?"

"To see me."

"You?" Locritus asked. "What business could be have?"

"Oh, don't waste time talking so to me!" Mrs. Lock-

ery cried passionately. "He came about your father—if you want to know."

Locritus looked at her in amazement.

"What on earth do you mean?" he asked, trying to control his voice, which flared and quivered past all holding.

"Your father shouldn't have deserted me," Mrs. Lockery sobbed. "He left me alone without a word. What was I to do, to know?"

"For heaven's sake, Mother, tell me what Mallows could tell you!"

"He told me nothing—nothing!"

Locritus waited, with hardened face, until she should explain.

"He was to find out where your father was," she whispered, "what kept him from home. He didn't tell me anything." She turned away and removed her hat with trembling fingers. Locritus stood silent for a moment; then he exclaimed, as though an idea had struck him:

"Then that's why he's married her," he said; "he's found something."

At the suggestion he fell musing. Mallows was not above blackmail; had he married Fanny? She said so, and she never lied. He turned to his mother.

"I'm going out again," he said abruptly. "I'll try and solve this."

"Where are you going?" she asked wildly.

"After them," Locritus answered, and disappeared from the room. He ran upstairs and found Fanny's bed-

room empty, with both window and door open. His own room also was empty, and he saw his nightshirt hanging over the back of a chair. Plainly, Fanny had been methodical. Coming down the stairs again, with three pounds from his cabinet—all the money he possessed—Locritus put on his hat and took up his stick. Without any further word to his mother he strode out of the house.

He saw by his watch that the time was half-past one, and set his shoulders squarely at the prospect of a long walk. The house at which he had visited Mallows was his destination, six miles away, across country, as the railway was not open to him. Along dark lanes, between tall rustling hedges, he walked, looking neither to right nor left, for the excitement had roused his nerves, and he was no longer a valiant Locritus. The fluttering of a frightened bird, awakened by his steps, sent his heart beating to his throat, and he braced himself a hundred times against an imagined danger. Before he had walked a mile Locritus realized that he was not fit for his work, that he was worn out and weak from the strain and the long walk he had already taken. It needed all his strength to keep on, with clenched teeth, and determination against fear and exhaustion and the bitter thoughts that struggled and fought for conquest in his mind. In desperation he sang—at first faintly and half-heartedly, his stumbling feet checking him often. Then, with the fresh clear night air in his face and filling his lungs, he grew stronger and had less difficulty in beating down his anger and self-reproach over this terrible happening.

He found that he could sing and that his weary feet seemed less weary in the times of his singing than they did when he was silent and thinking of his weariness. With longer strides Locritus tried to cover the distance with greater speed, and for a time he walked at a famous pace. Gradually, however, the temporary buoyancy faded, and his speed slackened into the drawling walk of the footsore. He had seen many tramps padding along in the day and evening, with bent knees and drooping heads, their sticks not sufficing to support a great pace. It was in vain they—and now he—tried to force an increased speed; the old exhaustion came back and seemed to strain the muscles behind and above the knee. Over and over again Locritus urged himself on, until his mouth was drawn with positive agony, and his eyes were dull and bloodshot.

At last he came within sight of the Mallowses' house, one of a row, all occupied by City men of varying ability and medium income and bearing the stamp of their occupants. He approached the house and rang the bell. It would be better not to knock, he thought, except as a last resort. While he was waiting he took out his watch: the time was quarter to four, so that he had taken two hours and a quarter for a journey that would in other circumstances have been completed in a little more than an hour and a half. No answer came to his first ring, so he rang again. Presently he saw a light, showing that somebody was coming downstairs. The gray morning was opening fast into daylight, but the house was dark within. The light came nearer, and a bolt was withdrawn.

Locritus heard the chain rattle, and, as he expected, the door showed an open space of two inches only.

"What is it?" asked a voice, the trembling voice of the young girl he had seen when he came before.

"I want to see Mr. Herbert Mallows," Locritus replied quickly. "My name's Lockery."

"Oh, I beg pardon, Mr. Lockery."

The door closed again, and the chain was unfastened. Then the lock clicked again, and he saw the girl peering at him.

"Mr. Herbert's away," she said. "I don't know when he'll be back."

Locritus had anticipated this: Mallows would hardly remain in the most obvious place of all for searchers to find him.

"I'm very sorry to trouble," he said, "but can you tell me where he is? It's very urgent."

"No, Mr. Lockery. He never said where he was going."

"Not to anybody? Not to his father?"

She shook her head vigorously behind the door.

"He wasn't in the habit of saying where he was going."

"It's a matter of life and death," Locritus urged.

"I can't tell you if I don't know," the girl replied. "I would if I could. His father doesn't know, I'm sure. He's always the last to hear."

"Who's there?" asked a man's voice. It was evidently that of old Mallows.

"I wanted to see your son," Locritus explained. The

girl went away from the door and seemed to speak to the old man in a whisper. In a moment she came back and asked him in. Locritus found old Mallows in a sitting room, wrapped in a dressing gown and holding the collar at his throat so as not to take cold in the morning air.

"Herbert went away this morning," he said, in a tone that Locritus fancied was conciliatory: he found it was habitual. "I've no idea where he is or when he'll return."

"He's taken my sister with him," Locritus said bluntly.

It was impossible to judge of Mr. Mallows's expression by the dim light of a small lamp. He clucked his tongue in sympathy.

"Herbert has?" he demanded. "I knew nothing of it —I assure you I knew nothing of it, Mr. Lockery. He said nothing to me. I know my son is hasty, impetuous. He wouldn't have told me. I knew nothing of it. He's very hasty, you know."

"I shouldn't have described him so," Locritus said drily, and was forced to sit down, for he felt suddenly faint.

"I can imagine him doing a discreditable thing," said old Mallows bitterly. "I've no wish to defend him from your anger."

"And you can't help me to find him?" Locritus asked.

"I will ask his mother."

The elder Mallows went out of the room, leaving Locritus with the lamp. He looked round the room, at the tasteless arrangement, and the banal pictures, all

with an unseeing eye. Tired though he was, Locritus felt that the sight of Mallows would have spurred his muscles into desperate energy. Oh, why had he not foreseen this and prevented it? How blind and selfish he had been! Whatever happened above, Mr. Mallows could on his return make no suggestion.

"His mother says she doesn't know," he said. There was an ambiguity in the expression that both recognized. Locritus understood clearly that Mr. Mallows was suspicious and also that he wished to dissociate himself from any attempt to mislead.

"I can only thank you," the boy said, rising. He was attended to the door and bade Mr. Mallows good-morning without knowing what he said or did. It was quarter-past four when he reached the end of the road; he could have imagined that he had been longer in the house. The morning was all astir, the birds making merry in the trees, the trees moving softly in the gentle wind; and distant sounds came to his ear. The return journey was much less unpleasant, although he never knew how he managed to accomplish it. His feet felt as though they were swollen to an immeasurable size; his head and eyes ached dully, and he reached Hampton all bent and disabled.

Arrived there, Locritus went first to Dickers's house, and, as it was a reasonable hour for that household, he had no hesitation in knocking there. To his surprise the face of Mrs. Dickers when she opened the door was pale and haggard.

"Have you brought me a message?" she asked.

"Message!" said Locritus, amazed. "I don't understand you. I came to see Tom. Isn't he at home?"

"He's not been home all night," Mrs. Dickers answered. "I don't know what can have happened. He went out early in the evening, not saying where he was going. I've been in such fear. I didn't like to come along to your house—I went to bed, but couldn't sleep, as I didn't hear him come in. I don't know what to do."

Locritus tried to comfort her by the assurance that it would be all right. But he was afraid of everything now; he could not speak confidently, as she saw.

"You've not seen him?" she asked anxiously.

"Not for several days," he said. "It *must* be all right. Nothing amiss could have happened to him. You may be quite sure of that."

"But these parts are so lonely; a man might so easily hide and spring out upon him," Mrs. Dickers replied faintly.

He laughed as loud as his aching body and his sore heart permitted him to do, and only Locritus noticed that it was the merest echo of a laugh that came.

"As for that," he said, with an effort to achieve joviality, "you may be quite safe. I've been walking in this neighbourhood the greater part of the night and haven't seen a soul. When I get to town I'll ring his firm up on the telephone. But you'll hear, I've no doubt. You mustn't be frightened. I'll telegraph any news."

Locritus walked slowly to the railway station. He felt that to go home again now was beyond his strength. The first train to town was being shunted into the station as

he arrived, and the ticket collector made elaborate signs of astonishment at his earliness as well as his disreputable, unshaven condition. Locritus saw as he sat in the carriage that his boots were white with the dust of the lanes. He brushed some of the same dust from his trousers by flicking his handkerchief, and leaned back in the corner of the carriage. The train was at King's Cross when he next opened his eyes, and he staggered out on to the platform all racked with pain and so stiff that he could hardly move. A cab to Fleet Street was his first thought, and he then found an early shaving saloon. By a quarter to nine he had washed and was brushed into respectability, and by this time it was possible to get some breakfast at the Tarratonga Tea Company.

Kitty espied him as soon as he entered the shop and came to him.

"Whatever is the matter?" she asked. "You look terribly ill."

Locritus told her when she had brought his tea, simply saying that his sister had run off and married a man whom he disliked.

"I suppose it's useless if I do find her," he admitted. "But the man's such a scamp that she simply *must* be got away from him and home again."

"Doesn't she know anything about him?" Kitty asked.

"She's young—and impressionable. Apparently he's seen her more often than I knew, and this man Mallows is so——"

"Mallows!" Kitty whispered. "Is that his name?"

Locritus saw her cheeks flame and the colour die away.

"If I'd told you!" she said. "If I'd only told you!"

"Oh, why didn't you!" cried Locritus, in agony, his mind seizing the significance of her exclamation.

"You *must* find him and bring her back," Kitty said. "My brother might know where they are. He—now, how can I help you? He generally goes out by nine, or he might be at home. Could you come in here about eleven? I'd take you to some places I've heard him speak of to Mallows and to others. He'd know, I expect. I wonder if I could get off?"

She put her hand to her mouth and then went away to ask permission. It was some minutes before she returned.

"I've got permission," she said, not mentioning the struggle required to gain it. "You come back at eleven. I hope I can help. You *must* get her away."

Locritus finished his breakfast quickly and went to the office. At the door he met Margaret Marsden, who looked with foreboding at his worn face and strained eyes.

"You look very ill," she said, all her own feelings lost in pity for him.

"I've been tramping all night," Locritus told her. "Your cousin Herbert Mallows is a young man of scoundrelly build."

They stood talking together for a few minutes, Locritus explaining what had happened; then he remembered his promise to Mrs. Dickers.

"And my friend Dickers is lost too," he said. "I've got to telephone to his firm to see if he's turned up."

As he moved in the direction of the telephone box one of the other clerks came from the manager's room.

"Oh, you're here, Mr. Lockery," he said; "this came half an hour ago. One of the porters took it in."

He held out a telegram, which Locritus snatched from him in his eagerness. As he read his eyes glowed and he repeated the contents aloud to Margaret:

Fanny and Mallows at the inn, Cratch. Is this news?
DICKERS.

Locritus gave a great cry as he finished reading the telegram. Margaret held out her hand for it and read it again. It had been handed in at Meltonside and not Cratch.

"The A B C," Locritus muttered, and went in search of it. On his return his face was less jubilant. "No station at Cratch," he said.

"The station must be Meltonside," Margaret told him, and without a word of inquiry he found that station in the railway guide.

"Now you must wish me Godspeed," he said soberly.

"You're not fit to go," she urged. "But you must go," she went on, stung afresh by his dark eyes and the nervous energy that made his hands tremble.

"I hate to trouble you," Locritus said, "but do you mind wiring to Mrs. Dickers, 63 Brownside Road, Hampton, saying, 'Tom safe and well—will wire again' —and sign it with my name?"

Margaret took a note of the address.

"And your mother?" she asked promptly as he was

preparing to go. Locritus lingered, with a curious smile upon his lips.

"Oh," said he, drawling the monosyllable, "I'd forgotten her."

"She ought to have some word," Margaret said.

"That's your kind heart," he muttered. "Yes, she must have something. Just say, 'Have heard news of Fanny—am in search'—don't say pursuit. My name's Charley—to her."

He ran out of the office, leaving her to find the address in what way she thought best.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FUGITIVES

THOMAS DICKERS content to work in an office for a salary was one person, and Thomas Dickers free from the blasting influence of figures was a very different person. In either capacity Dickers showed a lack of imagination, but the lack was not that of an ill-educated man, for he and Locritus had been at school together, and they had been taught by good masters who had been driven by poverty to forsake the scholarly life they desired and take up the very trying and arduous part of the schoolmaster. Thus, Dickers was hardly so dull and unlearned as Locritus pretended, nor was he so entirely free as his friend said from the glorious spirit of independence which makes men of value. He it was who had "derived" the name Locritus—thereby damning any plea for his knowledge of Latin—from the suggestion that "Loq" stood for loquacity, and "critus" for a persistent habit of railing and condemning. The name changed its first syllable from "Loq" to "Lo," becoming "Locri'tus" in the process. Its derivation from Lockery was obscured by the change of pronunciation, but the name itself stood. The schoolfellows who had chanted "Dickery-dickery-dock" and shortened the name to "Dick"

shortened Charles Lockery's name to "Lock," but had no great objection to calling him "Locritus." Dickers found pleasure in remembering these circumstances when he heard his friend coin new words with abandon; in his staid youth he claimed imagination for his own on the score of having invented a pleasing nickname.

"Not everybody," he insisted, "could do that."

Yes, Dickers thought, as he walked past the house, young Charley and he had always been good friends—the best of friends. He admired Charley, although some did not. It was true he misunderstood one's character, thought one had no imagination and no humour. But perhaps that was wilful; Locritus was fond of mystification, and little gibes that seemed to contain a possible sting and curiously enough had none. Hullo, what was that?

Dickers, of heroic mould, stopped suddenly in his walk at the sound of an opening door. He noticed that on the short pathway leading from the Lockerys' gateway there was the reflection of a bright light. Their front door must be open. Dickers held back under a tree a little way along the road and watched. He could see quite clearly all that followed, and his eyes opened wide and round at the spectacle.

First, a figure emerged from the gateway and looked around with a sharp eye. Dickers moved not an inch, but his lips parted, for the figure was that of Mallows, who held a small bag. Then came Fanny, who had evidently closed the door behind her, for the light disappeared. The two walked together, and Dickers thought

Fanny's hand seemed to rest upon her companion's arm. He started forward in pursuit, with an angry murmur, and gripped his stick firmly.

"Railway," said Dickers to himself, as he saw in which direction they were going. He noticed they walked apart as they neared the station, which made him wonder the more. He could not imagine Fanny sly: "Unless it's her new ideas that have changed her," he muttered, with instinctive dislike of anything to which he was unaccustomed.

As Hampton was a terminus there was generally a train standing at the platform, and in this case he saw that Mallows and Fanny had gone to a second-class carriage in the front of the train. "Shall I?" he muttered, and then ran quickly down the steps and chose a third-class carriage near the guard's van. It was about half-past six, and the evening still gray. At every station Dickers looked cautiously out of the window to see whether the two alighted; but the train ran into King's Cross without any sign from them. Here he saw Mallows making his way through the crowd, and, later, caught a glimpse of Fanny. Her cheeks were red, as though she were very much excited. The glimpse decided him: he would follow wherever they led. What on earth could be the matter?

Mallows went out of the station, and both figures turned up the Euston Road, Dickers keeping them in view in spite of the crowd. They turned in at the big archway over the approach to Euston Station. There Mallows went on, Fanny following more slowly at first, and running after him just as Dickers had made up his

mind to approach and question her. He had no alternative but to run also, and saw Mallows tailing on after three others at the booking office, while Fanny went within. Dickers was now so close that he heard Mallows swear at the booking clerk for keeping him for his change. The man addressed a rude remark in self-defence, but Mallows was gone.

Without pausing a minute, Dickers went to the booking office.

"Where did that chap book to?" he asked.

"What's that to do with you?" the clerk replied, still smarting under Mallows's unmannerly abuse.

"Oh, come now!" Dickers said. "Same again please."

He threw down a sovereign, and the man gave him a ticket. Then, running, Dickers was in time to see Mallows going through the barrier. The distance he was to travel did not enter Dickers's mind, but he noticed the man had given him only silver in change, and he found the fare given on his ticket was eleven shillings odd. He chose a rear third-class carriage, as before.

"Hope I'm all right," he muttered, and looked at his three companions in the carriage. "Meltonside? Never heard of the place. Haven't I? Meltonside?" He took out his walking map and examined it; but it evidently did not go far enough north. One of his companions noticed a disappointed expression on his face.

"Want a northern map?" he asked, offering one that he had himself been examining.

"I want to find the exact position of Meltonside," Dickers explained.

"Oh, that's somewhere south of Grantham," said his fellow traveller. "See here. It's a very small place. You change at Stamford or the station just before it, I think. Not much in my line, a place like Meltonside. I only touch the larger towns."

Why the man should think he was a commercial traveller Dickers could not comprehend. He tried to sleep, and succeeded so well that it was an hour later when he awoke. Eight o'clock; they would be in by nine, he thought. With a brain cleared by his short sleep Dickers started to regret having come. He then argued with himself: "This looks like running away. Why? And why with Mallows? Charley would never trust her with him, I know. No, he'd have gone himself, at all costs. Or he'd ask me before Mallows. He doesn't know what I know of Mallows. On the other hand, he's always been more down on him than ever I've been. No; I'm sure I'm doing right. Anyway, I'm doing no harm in seeing what happens. It isn't like idle curiosity, considering it's my dear girl."

He sat there in his corner idly watching the three other occupants of the carriage, and wondering what journey they could be making and why it had been undertaken by each. Insensibly he drifted off into a further short sleep, which passed the time easily and left his senses alert and keen. Before he had time to get anxious about his station the train slowed down at Meltonside station. Dickers kept in the background and came out of the station just in time to hear Mallows say to the driver of a fly:

"How far is it to Cratch? The inn there?"

"About a mile, mile and a half," the man said, in a countryman's voice.

Dickers saw Mallows hand Fanny into the fly, and they drove off. There was no other vehicle in sight. He asked a man for the post office, which proved to be a corner of the general grocery stores. No telegrams could be sent that night, as the office was closed. Would the grocer mind, as a great favour, taking two telegrams to be dispatched in the morning? The man held out that he had nothing to do with the post office, but agreed to do it quite as a question of "friendship," as he put it. Dickers accordingly wrote out two telegrams: one to his mother and one to Locritus. He thought it wisest to put the office address on the latter, and felt he knew Locritus well enough to risk explanations if he were building a mare's nest. He had no doubt, however, in his own mind. This done, and the grocer complimented and paid, he asked in which direction Cratch lay, and learned it.

The way was not at all unpleasant, excepting that the road was narrow and he was uncertain whether it was the right one. There were fields on either side, as he could tell dimly, but there was no moonlight, so he could not be very sure of his way. Presently he met the fly returning and knew he was in the right road. The driver wished him good-night, in pleasant country fashion, and looked curiously back over his shoulder when he had passed.

Dickers strode on until he came to a little street of houses with small windows, all dark. He approached the

only place in which there was any light, and saw that it was the inn. So Mallows was there, and Fanny. He was looking closer when Mallows came from the door suddenly and walked past him. Dickers turned.

"Mallows!" he said softly, "Mallows!"

Mallows looked back, at first wonderingly, and then with a great fear.

"Oh, my God!" he cried, and ran for his life.

Dickers followed close upon his heels, swearing horribly, so that Mallows might be further intimidated. But Mallows was swifter and lighter than he, and each step seemed gradually to place a little greater distance between them. They ran silently along the road for a time, Mallows every now and then looking back in a frightened way and running harder. Neither had forgotten their last encounter, and Dickers saw that the suddenness of this fresh meeting had robbed Mallows of any nerve he had once possessed.

Dickers began to puff, but he saw Mallows take wildly to the fields, and gave chase, running as quickly as he could, and holding his elbows well in. Then in the darkness Dickers lost sight of the fugitive, and ran hither and thither shouting, "I see you," or some such tomfool phrase to alarm his quarry, supposing Mallows to be in hiding.

"What an idiot the man is to run away like that!" Dickers muttered to himself at length, giving up the chase as hopeless and standing with his chest heaving and his heart fluttering from the violent exertion. He imagined they must have run for quite a quarter of an

hour, and for some distance, so hot had the race been at first. What should he do?

At first Dickers tried to find his way back to Cratch, but when he realized that he had absolutely no idea where it was he desisted. It was a not unpleasant sensation to feel that Mallows also must be wandering in these fields, unless he knew the ground or carried a compass. Dickers carried a compass, being a great walker, but he could not see it in the darkness, and he seemed to have lost his matches. With this loss he was greatly disappointed, because he was denied by it the consolation that a smoke would have brought. He sought a hedge and sat down in its shelter, thinking what a game it would be if Mallows came by near him and he could catch his leg.

"Catch—Cratch," Dickers said to himself. "Where have I heard that name before? Cratch: I'm sure I've heard it."

But he was so full of sleepiness that his head drooped upon his chest, and in a few moments he was breathing regularly in the placid slumber of the tired, healthy man. He did not waken until the sun was quite high in the sky, and the birds were all calling several hours before he heard them.

Stirring drowsily and opening his mouth wide in a yawn that satisfied his extremest sleepiness, Dickers at last rolled onto his back and stared up at the blue, cloudless sky, looking up into its depths with a strange sense of nearness and kinship with natural things. His first thought was one of exquisite pleasure—the thought of

one who looks anew on the world in its happiest aspect; then he thought of breakfast, with the consciousness of those crawling things which had probably possessed themselves of his clothing while he slept. Then Fanny and Mallows—had he been a fool? What was he to do now? Drawing up his legs after their long, comfortable stretch, and feeling a stiffness in his joints, he turned first upon his side, and then hoisted himself to his knees. A man was watching him with open-mouthed amusement.

"Hev' you slept there all night?" the man asked, touching his hat when he saw the stranger wore a collar and possessed a billycock.

"It's a little habit of mine!" Dickers exclaimed. The man sniggered in an affable way, for he noticed that the newly awakened man wore a watch chain. "Have you never slept in the open?" Dickers inquired, somewhat to carry off his travel stains.

"No," said the man slowly; "never."

"It's a grand thing for the health," Dickers volunteered awkwardly.

"But it brings rheumatism," the man countered.

Dickers would have given a lecture on the circulation of the blood; but he felt more than hungry, so he owned up.

"The fact is," he said, "I lost my way."

"I thought there was something of that kind," the man answered. "Where do you want to go, may I ask?"

"Cratch," Dickers told him promptly. "I want to get there at once."

"Oh—you're a deal out of the way," the man told him, without further direction. "You must have missed the road altogether."

"More than likely, considering I've never been in this part of the country before," Dickers returned. "I belong to London."

"Oh, yes," the man said slowly, as though he had heard of it. "Oh, yes."

"Well, which way to Cratch?" asked Dickers.

The man scratched his head, thinking of the best way.

"I'm going that way myself, presently," he said at last.

"How long?" Dickers demanded. "I'm famishing. Besides, I must get there quickly."

"Eh?" asked the man. "You're what?"

"I want my breakfast," Dickers cried, in the heightened tone Englishmen use to foreigners to insure comprehension.

The man very generously gave him a hunch of bread and the remains of some liquid that might have been cold tea or very bad ale. Dickers eyed him with gratitude and asked whether he would accept a trifling sum for his entertainment. The man refused, but later, upon pressure, he took threepence with a kindly eye. Under the influence of a further respect for his find, he grew loquacious and informed Dickers that they were five miles from Cratch by the road, but that a short cut across the fields reduced the distance. His business lay, he ex-

plained, in the other direction. Would Dickers go with him? They went together.

"Do I look like a tramp?" Dickers asked, brushing himself down roughly with his open hands and dislodging fragments of earth and turf, along with several ants and one insect with many legs.

"No," the man assured him, after reflection; "not like that."

"Well, what?" asked Dickers.

"Couldn't say," the man ventured at length in a husky voice. In a minute he admitted that Dickers looked rather like a gentleman from London who had slept all night under a hedge, and the truth as well as the sentiment of this remark appealed so much to Dickers that the man was endeared to him.

"You're an honest fellow," he said, with a suspicion of patronage.

"Couldn't get on if I weren't," the man replied. "Got to be honest hereabouts. There's no room for them as is otherwise."

"What—is there such a place?" demanded the cynical and pessimistic Dickers. He was not understood, but his new friend vouchsafed further information.

"His lordship's very strict," he said, "but I've heard he's a good landlord. They say so," he added, with a backward jerk.

"You're a farm hand?" Dickers asked.

"Yes," said the man. "I do a bit of everything. I belong to Meltonside. I don't go to Cratch more often 'n I need do."

They talked of the weather prospects and grew quite friendly, the man relating stories of the neighbours and giving in his dry way some news of the country, as well as showing an acquaintance with the seasons which was beyond Dickers. As Dickers rather prided himself upon his agricultural knowledge, he listened attentively, not without secret mortification when his assumptions of knowledge were disproved. The man was no friend to his ignorance, at which he jeered greatly, and opened his mind the more.

"I got to go across the railway," he said, "to the farmhouse beyond. You can't see it for the trees. That clump there, see?"

He pointed ahead with his finger, and Dickers fancied he could notice a fine, thin stream of smoke rising above the clump indicated.

"Take care!" the man warned him. "There's a powerful dip when we near the line. Takes a man his time knowing his way hereabouts. There's no cattle brought to these places. 'Tis too dangerous for them to walk here without watching."

Dickers looked out for the railway, and some distance to the right imagined a sharp streak of silver showed, as if it might be a line.

"Is that the railway?" he asked, pointing.

"Ay. It runs right through here to Meltonside," the man said. "Just here there's a bridge."

They found a narrow wooden bridge, recently repaired, and safeguarded for passengers by a wooden rail on either side. Dickers looked with interest to the north,

and watched the shimmering lines until they disappeared in the distance.

"That way lies Cratch, I suppose?" he asked.

"No; farther east," the man told him.

"And the other way Meltonside?" he asked.

"Yes."

They both looked toward the town, only two miles distant, and saw its clustered roofs, and many spirals of smoke coming from red chimneys.

"A fine place," the man said.

"Smallish," commented Dickers, who wondered whether his telegrams had been dispatched. The thought shocked him. Why, here was he dawdling about in the most pleasant fashion, forgetting all about his duty and his search.

"I say," he said, "I *must* get to Cratch. It's most urgent."

The man looked at him queerly.

"Still thinkin' of breakfast?" he suggested.

"No. I've got business," Dickers said hurriedly. "The breakfast was only one of the things I wanted Cratch for. You'll show me the way quickly, won't you? Look at that!"

His eye had caught a strange object on the steep declivity leading to the railway line, and he indicated its position by his extended finger.

"Funny," said the man. "Looks like a man. Another tramp, I make no doubt." He glanced at Dickers with a slow smile.

"Men don't lie asleep head downward," Dickers said. "Nor on their faces."

His heart was stirred with a strange excitement; he caught his companion's arm and looked into his eyes with horror in his own.

"It's a man, sure enough," he muttered. "Yes, but what man?"

They hurried to the part of the bank above where they supposed they had seen the figure, and began to scramble down, tearing clothes and hands in their descent, so steep was the declivity. And all the time Dickers's heart was thumping in his chest, and his lips were firm set at the thought that had come plunging into his mind. His companion, having only curiosity, set about his work with less desperation, and was soon left behind by Dickers, whose feet slipped and scrambled on the loose stones and tough shining grass that spotted the side of the bank.

Mallows lay there on his face in the morning sun, quite dead, with blood on his lips. His face was perfectly rigid and white, and his cheeks were cruelly torn, as though he had fallen suddenly and pitched from point to point in his descent. Dickers turned the body over so that it lay flat, the eyes staring straight upward, fixed and horrible in their meaningless glare.

CHAPTER XXVI

"WHEN BALE IS HIGHEST"

By his hurried departure from the office Locritus was prevented from explaining to any one of the principals why he was compelled to leave his work undone for the present. He had just time to run and tell Kitty that he had news, and then he took a cab to Euston, without a moment's delay. In the train he tried to sleep, but in vain, for his nerves were all galloping and jangling in the wildest stampede. He endeavoured to forget for a moment the terrible feeling of hatred that surged within him against Mallows, and hammered away at his brain with seductive phrases to turn the current of his thoughts elsewhere than on the loss of Fanny. Both those who liked and those who had no patience with Locritus forgot that with his irrepressible spirits went a melancholy that corresponded in its depths with the height of his normal gaiety. When a schoolfellow called Locritus "nervous as a kitten," he was speaking the truth—more than he knew, for the remark was thrown off with a schoolboy's freedom of general statement. It was not until half the journey was completed that Locritus dropped off into an uneasy doze, and awoke with the sun shining on his face, and his head racked and harassed by aches that seemed to extend from the neck to the forehead.

Locritus groaned involuntarily and found his fellow passengers looking at him with solicitude. He had dreamed wildly of an agonizing struggle with overpowering forces, and was weaker on his awakening than he had been before falling asleep. It was only a few minutes' farther journey to Meltonside; and he nearly fell in getting out of the carriage, so unsteady was he after his night's adventures.

"This will *not* do, young fellow," said Locritus to himself. "Not by no means, it won't."

He could not think what to do to relieve his pain, for there was no refreshment buffet on the platform, and the street without offered no shops where nerve-stilling medicine might be obtained. Accordingly, Locritus stepped into the one available fly, threw himself against its hard cushions, and demanded to be driven to the inn, Cratch. Driven there he was, along the narrow, rutted road, which made the vehicle jump and rattle in a way to shatter bones as well as nerves. At the end of the journey he paid the flyman and entered the inn. A girl came forward, rosy-cheeked and handsome, and seemed to be in charge of the inn's hospitalities.

"Did a lady and gentleman arrive here last night?" Locritus asked.

"Yes, sir: Mr. and Mrs. Mallows," the girl answered.

"Could I see—Mrs. Mallows?" he asked.

"I'll ask," the girl told him. "Who shall I say?"

"Her brother."

When he was taken up to the room where Fanny was Locritus could hardly climb the stairs without stagger-

ing; to Fanny in her normal state the spectacle of his illness would have brought compassion and fear, but she was strung up to a pitch of nervous tension that equalled his own. It was no simple thing to make a runaway marriage. They stood facing each other for a minute, Fanny's face white, and her eyes large and bright with tears that she kept back only by exercise of the greatest force. She was the first to speak.

"Where is Herbert?" Fanny asked. "What have you done with Herbert?"

"What a fright you've given us!" Locritus said thickly.

"What have you done with Herbert?" Fanny repeated in the same dull tone.

"I don't know what you mean," Locritus muttered, pressing his hand across his eyes in a vain attempt to clear his mind.

"You've taken him away," Fanny whispered. "I know you've done that. Why couldn't you let me go?"

"Mallows to the devil!" Locritus said. "I've come to take you back. I've not seen Mallows. I could have killed him, Fanny."

"I'm not going back!" Fanny told him, slowly and deliberately. "Whatever happens, I won't go back."

"Oh, God, Fanny, how can you be so mad?" Locritus cried. "That you went away with that brute is bad enough. You must be sensible."

"You don't help yourself by abusing him," she warned.

He laughed stupidly, as though the world were whirling round him.

"I couldn't abuse him," he said; "his actions are far truer guides."

"He was the only one who helped me. All of you knew I was unhappy; and none of you made any attempt to save me. Only Herbert—whatever you may say."

Locritus made another effort to recover control of his brain, which seemed reeling and drunken within his aching head. He stared at her until she swam in a mist before his eyes.

"Fanny, you must come!" he urged. "I couldn't tell you what a cad the man is. You ought never to have listened to him."

"You let me go," said Fanny, "without a word."

"But, dearest, I never knew . . ."

He wanted to show her that he had been innocent as far as her acquaintance with Mallows was concerned; but her thoughts still harped on the wrongs she had endured at home. They had assumed such proportions in her mind that each tone she remembered her mother using hurt her afresh in her recollection; the thought made her shudder as she stood there.

"Where is Mallows?" Locritus asked.

"You best know that," Fanny murmured, her lips quivering.

"I tell you I've not seen him," he cried passionately. "I told you that. My word used to be sufficient."

"I can't believe anything now," Fanny said, all tremblingly.

"How absurd!" Locritus interrupted. "Why, you've

let this business mount in your mind until it's become an obsession. If you'd seen her, Fanny!"

He was guilty of a lie: his mother had been frightened and defiant, not penitent. The words pictured tears, but Fanny disregarded the appeal.

"I can't go back. And I've not seen Herbert since we arrived here."

Locritus saw she fingered the wedding ring on her finger and felt sick to think of Mallows in the rôle of proprietor.

"My dear child," he said, and his pain must justify the bitterness, "why can't you go back? Not even to me?"

"You let me go," Fanny repeated. "I appealed to you. You made fun and wouldn't see my heart was breaking."

"For a few words of a selfish woman!" he said. "Think, dear—how often did you suffer from them? We might have been quite contented."

"You hadn't any sympathy with me. You understood well enough that this was bound to happen as soon as I awoke."

"Awoke—to what? Mallows?" he asked angrily. Would his head never cease its strangling, terrible throbbing? He held the table to prevent himself from pitching headlong at Fanny's feet. "Is there anything would make you come back?" he continued. "Any way I could bring you to it?"

Fanny pressed her hands to her face, and he saw her shoulders quivering with the violent emotion she strove to conceal.

"If I get Mallows to give you up?" he asked. The idea came almost as an inspiration—a flash of light into his muddled and bewildered brain.

"I can't bear you to stay, Charley. You are cruel," Fanny sobbed.

He crossed the room and groped vaguely for her hands, to take them from her face, but he could see nothing, and in silence he bowed his head. Fanny turned away and stood there staring out of the window in despair.

Locritus cried out hoarsely, "Fanny!" as he caught the table once more in support. "I'm sorry," he said, with one of his old smiles. "I'm tired. If I've been cruel or unkind, Fanny . . . I've been hunting for you all night. First I went to Mallows's home, then back again, then to the office, and now here I am, and the little sleep I had in the train . . ." he went on, half to himself, half aloud, in extenuation of his brusqueness, and looked at her for a moment, although he could only see her white blouse dimly, a long distance away.

"I *will* go," he said, standing upright. "I *will* go. But I shall come back again, Fanny. You'll change your mind; you'll come with me in the end. I know you will. You can't hold out forever."

Fanny made no answer, and he went to the door with halting, uneven steps.

Downstairs he asked whether some tea could be prepared for him; it seemed the only thing he could take that might have some effect in quieting his too riotous

nerves, which ran hither and thither as in a drunken orgy. He sat down in a chair in the parlour, blind to his surroundings, and shaking violently, as though the excitement had entirely overcome his self-control. The girl who brought his tea noticed that he did not look at it, and came round to peer in his face.

"Are you not well, sir?" she asked.

Locritus stirred and looked at her alarmed face.

"It's all right," he said, trying to smile. "I'm deadly tired. I've been travelling a long distance. This tea will soon bring me round."

"Do you know anything of Mr. Mallows?" the girl asked.

Locritus paused, with the cup raised in his hand.

"I know him," he said.

"I meant to say, had you seen him, sir. He went out shortly after arriving, and he didn't come back. And Mrs. Mallows, your sister, sir; I thought she seemed nervous-like. She expected him back, seemingly, and I'm afraid he may have met with some accident, sir."

"Quite likely," Locritus muttered, without thinking. "I mean, I don't expect anything's happened. But I don't know what he may be doing now."

Seeing that he did not wish to talk, the girl withdrew; as the hostess in her mother's absence, she was concerned, as well as curious, to know what might have happened to their male guest. Locritus continued to drink his tea and had three cups, after which he took out his pipe mechanically, and lighted it.

"I shall be coming back," he said to the girl, who

nodded and smiled. Then, with his head much clearer, Locritus stepped into the street, now all white with sunshine, the windows on the sunny side being shuttered with their green boards. The window frames, which once had been brown, were faded to a pale lavender colour. On the other side of the street, opposite to the houses with their green blistering doors all glinted with the sunlight, were others, whose doors, being in the shade, were open. Locritus could see through to the back of the houses, to gardens where vegetables grew, with tall flowers rising, and children playing beside them. The road stretched white and dusty to north and south, but very narrow, as though it were used only by farm carts going through the village singly in their slow, trundling progress. One such cart passed him, flies busy about the great horse's ears, and the driver sitting snugly on the board end of the near shaft, chewing solemnly as he rode, leaving the horse to follow the track it knew so well from constant journeys to and fro. The man touched his straw hat to Locritus, peering at him from beneath its shade, which turned the bronzed face to a darker hue and left only his chin bare to the sunlight.

The contrast between this and his own hurrying mode of life and restless, eager thoughts struck Locritus with a fresh significance. He realized anew that his happiness lay entirely in forward-looking, with the possibility of joys to come; this man, with his pleasant, good-tempered face, what had he to disturb him or break his rest? The idea was old, as old as the first modern man, who saw, in placidity, peace triumphant. If Locritus had not been

very strangely affected he would have enjoyed this gleam of gentle ease far more than the man who lived in it every day of his life; and he would have laughed at what now grew so solemnly in his mind. A few steps brought him abreast of the lingering cart, and he walked for a time in the winding, trembling shadow of its thick wheels. The man on the shaft made no attempt to speak to him, only flicked some flies from the horse's head with his long-tailed whip. Locritus was looking so intently upon the ground that he did not notice anything amiss and continued walking slowly, with inclined head. The man on the cart raised his voice to a low, lazy murmur.

"Good-morning, my lord," he said.

Locritus raised his eyes from their intent observation of the road, thinking the man had spoken to him. He saw that a stranger on horseback had passed them and was riding at a walking pace into the village street. Locritus turned and looked after the stranger with a curious excitement.

"Why, who is that?" he asked the driver, who had returned to his peaceful appearance of slumber.

"That," said the man, opening his eyes; "that's the Earl of Rayley."

Locritus stood quite still, lost in amazement. For the stranger on horseback was his father!

CHAPTER XXVII

"BOOT IS NIGHEST"

"FATHER!" called Locritus.

Mr. Lockery turned round and checked his horse. Then, obeying a sudden impulse, he dismounted and met his son as he ran up. His face was quite haggard.

"Charley," he said, "thank God you've found me out."

"Yes, but come quickly," Locritus cried, "Fanny's here!"

"Here!" exclaimed Mr. Lockery, amazed. "Here!"

"She suddenly rebelled," Locritus told him breathlessly. "She's been feeling very strongly for a long time. So she's married that scamp Mallows, who's rushed her down here. She refuses to go back: but you must come with me and persuade her."

To Locritus the explanation was clear; to his father it was bewildering; but he led his horse to the inn, a few steps away. They mounted the stairs together and found Fanny starting up from her chair at their entrance. All her resistance had vanished; it had evaporated even while Locritus was closing the door, and her pride only had prevented her from calling him back.

"Father," she whispered, and ran to him, hiding her

face against his shoulder and crying softly. Locritus walked about excitedly, touching the chairs, the table, some flowers that stood there in a vase—not knowing what he was doing, only striving to be quiet.

"You poor child," Mr. Lockery murmured. "If I'd not left you. If I had stayed."

She protested against his self-blame, with gentle hands taking his and holding them tightly.

"No, no," she said. "And poor old Charley: he's ill; I see how mad I was, all foolish and headlong. I didn't know . . . didn't think. He told me he would bring me to you. He promised. That was why I came."

"Oh, don't talk of it," Locritus burst out. "Dearest, you forbid me to say anything against him—and I *must* tell you that he's unworthy. A man whose soul is for money, money and profits alone . . ."

He stood quite still as Fanny left her father and faced him.

"I am married to him," she said gently.

For the first time in their lives brother and sister could not meet each other's eyes. They both looked at the ground, and Fanny made a movement toward him. "I was wrong," she said. "I was hurt and frightened. What has happened to him: why doesn't he come and defend himself?"

"Put on your hat and jacket, child," her father told her. "He shall have full opportunity of defending himself. You'll come, won't you?"

Fanny obeyed in silence. They went down the stairs again.

In the street, outside the inn, they met Dickers coming along at a great speed, his eyes wide open with the consciousness of his momentous errand.

He raised his hat and looked pityingly at Fanny. Drawing Locritus aside, he whispered:

"Mallows is dead; I found him this morning."

Locritus almost staggered back, but with a sharp glance at his side he put his finger to his lips in warning. Fanny looked at Dickers as though it was not surprising to her that anything extraordinary should be added to the events of the last few hours. She suffered herself to be led quietly along by her father, upon whose arm she hung. The two young men dropped behind, and Locritus demanded particulars about Mallows. These Dickers gave, with full detail and with a good deal of jerky explanation. He told, too, how he had followed Fanny and Mallows; and of the flight of the latter on the previous evening, upon their encounter in the dark street.

"I say, Charley," he concluded, "we looked at some things he'd got in his pocket: there's a note of yours for thirty pounds."

"Yes, yes!" Locritus said impatiently.

"I had to leave it there, of course. I hope it's all right."

"Oh, quite all right. I've got his receipts for most of it," Locritus assured him.

"You might have had anything you wanted from me," his friend ventured, not intending to be reproachful, but showing a slight touch of feeling.

"Well—I wanted to get it from Mallows particularly," Locritus said. "I wanted his money to pay for the thing for which it *did* pay. You may be quite sure I didn't borrow willingly—especially from him."

"Then there's another thing you'll be interested to know. There's a paper with just a few rough notes on it that seem to refer to Miss Marsden. Wasn't old Mallows her guardian or something?"

"That's so!" Locritus replied.

"This paper shows—or at least I think it does—that young Mallows knew old Mallows was keeping Miss Marsden out of some money. Only a trifle, mind you; but something. I don't know, and of course I didn't get more than a glance, because others examined the things as well as me."

Locritus whistled.

"Tell you what, old chap," he said, "I had such a run last night that I'm sick to death. I can hardly walk."

"And I've been sleeping and lazying about—without a thought of Fanny or anything. You're quite right, Charley: I'm as insensible as a block of wood. Got no thought. . . . Oh, God, to think of Fanny marrying Mallows! It makes a man humble——"

He broke off bitterly.

"Look here!" Dickers went on. "I must go back home by the next train. My mother will be in an awful state. I wired her at the same time that I wired you. But I'm afraid she won't dare to open the envelope."

"Then she's got two to open," Locritus told him.

"Don't go back to-day, old chap—unless you really do think she'll be frightened."

"Sure of it. I know how she's been before. How is it your father's here? That is him, isn't it?"

"Seems he's the owner of the land. I don't understand it yet myself," Locritus said vaguely. "A man told me he was the earl of something. But I've been so concerned about getting Fanny away—she believes in that man, Dickers, believes in him! Can you imagine it?"

What was apparently the home of the Earl of Rayley presently came into view. The three visitors were ushered into a large bright room, and Mr. Lockery invited them all to sit down. He remained standing.

"Fanny," he said, "if I send you to bed, will you try and sleep? You need about a day's rest."

She promised, all her protest gone; only her head drooped, because she was quite exhausted. Before she went she came over to Locritus. He rose and kissed her, as he knew she wished, and felt her warm lips upon his cheek.

Then, when she had gone, Mr. Lockery sat at the table.

"You're worn out, too, Charles," he said.

"Mallows is dead!" Charley told him. "I don't think I could sleep now, I'm so excited. My head's throbbing like an engine."

"Dead!" echoed his father. "What a tremendous relief!" He sat there as though the news had stunned him.

"This is Mr. Dickers, I think?" he added, after a long pause.

Dickers nodded, and Locritus explained the extent of his services.

Dickers was furnished with breakfast, and Locritus and his father were left alone.

"This is a weird business," the boy ventured, with an odd laugh.

"I want to tell you about it," his father said. "I don't pretend I can justify myself to you—you can imagine how often I've argued with myself. First let me say that I was purposing coming home to-morrow. I mean, to go to Hampton. My father, your grandfather, died only ten days ago, and I couldn't leave here before, even for a short time."

Locritus murmured something—he knew not what.

"This estate is small," Mr. Lockery went on, after stopping to collect his facts and dispose them in intelligible order, "but the income from foreign securities is large. The estate is entailed, the money is, of course, a different matter. I was the second son, and led an easy enough life. I went to London, saw the sights, being a rather raw young fellow—and I fell in love with your mother. We had been married (but privately, and my father knew nothing of it, because I was a coward and dared not tell him). We had, I say, been married five years when my elder brother died—that meant that, having married into a lower middle-class family, I was called upon to become a landed proprietor and accordingly to bring my wife home. I hadn't the courage,

Charley. My father was a most autocratic man, and when at last I had to confess to being married he threatened to disinherit me. Now, I said the estate was small; and it is barely large enough to keep itself going —or rather to keep the owner in a state of independence. I wasn't strong enough to hold out; I had no thought of your mother; and I capitulated by asking on what terms the inheritance might be retained. My father said he would never see my wife and children; he swore that if I brought them here or lived away from here I should not see a farthing of his money. It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?—but it is really characteristic of him. You must remember—I don't plead, I only ask the remembrance as a right—that I had lived under my father's will during the greater part of my life; it is not easy to throw off the yoke.

"Well, on those terms I compromised. I was to visit my family occasionally but to spend the greater part of the time here. It came rather easily in the end, because with my first signs of neglect your mother naturally became fretful. I dared give her no reason—the only course I could follow was one of steadfast refusal to explain. For I knew your mother, in her headlong way, would rush down here, demand to be heard; and I knew that my father would not fail of his promise either. . . .

"Now comes the difficult part. I mean, difficult as from me to you. I found I wasn't interested in my son and daughter. Your mother tried in vain to make them interesting at first, but she soon lost interest herself.

She sought relief from her cares in active work of various kinds, and I tried to forget her and you. So it went on: I had made sure you would have a fairly good education, that would fit you to follow me here, and you know Fanny has the polite accomplishments. But for a long time I could not get myself to recognize either of you as of vital interest to me. It wasn't until Fanny grew up and I found she was grieving that I began to feel terribly penitent. But my father, become an impatient invalid, kept my every nerve strained in his service. Then I began to see that I had been mistaken in you, too, Charley; that your quietness concealed a shrewd mind, and your attempts to gloss everything with a patent gaiety were really the result of a gentle cynicism which you'll shake off. I was several times on the verge of making an explanation during the time I was last at Hampton; but something, some old devil of shame and pride, kept me from it. . . .

"That's about all for just now. There has never been any attempt on my part—after the first five years—to conceal your existence: all those around are aware that I have a wife and children elsewhere. And they think no more of me, I make no doubt, for keeping them stowed away like a coward. I want you to forgive me, Charley, for your part: I've got to go to each in turn, and beg that. But you're a man—or will be, and I'm glad to have explained to you first. I expect it will be more difficult with the others. That's still to come."

During the recital Locritus had kept quite still, leaning back in his chair, his eyes half closed.

"You mean that you are now Earl of Rayley and that life will henceforth be relieved of the anxiety of money-grubbing?" he asked.

His father nodded.

"But you mean that we have been kept as we have been up to the present moment by the whim of your father?"

"And my cowardice."

"It's embittered Mother; it's been the cause of all Fanny's unhappiness."

His father flinched and nodded slowly.

"You are quite right," he admitted. "I can never make up for that. I can only try and make things better."

"Wouldn't you have been happier without the compromise?" Locritus persisted.

"Perhaps. I don't think so. I thought your mother was tired of me; and I'm afraid I ignored you altogether."

"It was risky, that. Was she tired of you?"

"My boy—who can say? I can't forgive your mother—because I injured her. She was quite good and high spirited when we were married. But I think she is easily tired, easily casts aside what she has exhausted. Do you think that is unjust?"

Locritus rose and walked about the room.

"I'm all in a muddle," he said. "Who am I to sit in judgment or forgive or withhold forgiveness? I thought you unjust, but only because I don't think I've ever been able to make up my mind about Mother. She's brusque and hasty—but happy she certainly has not been. Surely,

with pleasanter surroundings, with something to live for, her energies would move more easily. I believe all her irritability is due to her misdirected energy. She feels she's just filling up holes that other people have dug, and that's not a profitable or happy sensation, I take it."

His father had listened to these disjointed and defensive remarks with keen attention, and he nodded at their conclusion.

"I can't do it without your help," he said.

"I'm the worst helper you could have," Locritus answered. But they shook hands and smiled at each other like old acquaintances newly met.

Dickers came back into the room in a few minutes, having completed his breakfast; and began to make excuses for going. They begged he would stay, but he knew he ought to hasten home, so the invitation was firmly declined.

"Before I go," said Dickers, "I'd like to add one thing. And that is—if you'll let me say it—that Mallows knew all about your not being a commoner, Mr. Lockery. In his notebook, which I saw, there were several entries, things about Somerset House, and quotations from Debrett. They had no significance to me at the time, but I see it all now in the clearest way."

"It seems he got Mother to tell him something," Locritus continued, turning to his father; "then I suppose he looked up the name—a thing it never struck us to do. But then we weren't really very curious, excepting Mother, who has no practicality whatever and

scorns peerages. After that he paid court to Fanny. I've thought he wasn't above blackmail."

"Above it!" Dickers cried. "Above it! Why, my boy, if you knew what I knew of him. I've not kept it back purposely—I haven't had an opportunity of telling you. He's been a low sort of a blackguard. I'll tell you all about it some other time. It don't seem good to talk of him, somehow. Remember, I've seen him lying dead two or three hours ago. And it was for fear of me that he ran to his death."

Dickers looked from one to the other and explained the occurrences of the previous night. Then he rose.

"Before I go," said Dickers, "I'd like to say just this. Locritus knows already that I've wanted to marry Fanny for a long time. I suppose it makes a difference—this change in her position. But I can't help saying that it makes no difference to me. I think she would be no happier anywhere, whatever her position, than I could make her. I'm a clerk, but I'm not a pettifogging clerk, and I shall rise. Locritus knows . . ." He jerked his head awkwardly. "That's all I wanted to say," he concluded.

"I shan't interfere," said Fanny's father. "I don't see how I can, now. But, Mr. Dickers, I propose to take Fanny away for a while. In honour, you'll say nothing to her."

"In honour, I've said nothing all the time," Dickers said bluntly. "If I'd spoken before some part of this might not have happened."

Locritus looked ashamed.

"I didn't mean that, Charley—didn't mean what you think. I know the fault's mine, the fault of cowardice. Should you have forbidden me?" he asked Mr. Lockery.

"I've been married myself. I hope I'm not an outrageous snob," Mr. Lockery said, and laughed. "And I think you are a gentleman."

So Dickers went away, to return to his mother and to live in hope. He purposed waiting patiently until such time as he might see Fanny again: his faith in her was so unshakeable that he could not imagine her other than she was at home, before the final catastrophe of her flight with Mallows. His eyes were dark and stern for many days after this, but they were filled with an expression of resolve. In his patience, Dickers found his manhood; and in his manhood some sort of triumph over weakness and vacillation, as well as triumph over the restlessness of youth. It is true he became contented and prosperous, but at home he kept his clean heart and his brave patience, and he remained what he always had desired to be—a representative of the traditional type of Englishman.

When Dickers had gone Locritus turned to his father.

"Dickers is the best fellow in the world," he said simply. "And I really must lie down or I shall go crazy."

Between clean sheets he found at last sweet sleep, free from distressing dreams, and with a brief interval for supper he rested until the following morning, when the three Lockerys met together at breakfast. It was then that Fanny was told of Mallows's death, and she heard

of it without crying or any outburst of feeling. But her remark to Locritus when they were alone together disquieted him more than any sign of affection had power to do.

"I suppose it was best he should die, Charley," she said in a low voice. "Wasn't it?"

He sighed, checking the sigh as soon as he knew it was upon his lips.

"I don't know," he said wearily. "I don't know what's best. I think it is. No man on earth could satisfy you, because you look for so much. You look for gods. Besides," he added, "he hadn't anything to give, dear. When I talked ill of him yesterday I was worn out and didn't know what I was saying; he wasn't worthy. . . . Look, I'm drivelling. Shan't you be interested in going abroad?"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE OBSTACLE

ALL three returned to London a little later in the day, Locritus bidding the others good-bye at Euston, leaving them to make their way to Hampton. He was glad that he was not to be present at their home-coming, and went to Fleet Street with something of relief in his heart. First of all he made his way to the Tarratonga Tea Company's depot, where he saw Kitty.

"You mean he's dead," she whispered, coming to him, and reading that in his eyes. Locritus nodded. They were almost alone in the smoking room, for the general luncheon hour was over, and the men who patronized the Tarratonga were all gone back to their work.

"By an accident," Locritus assured her. "He leaped into the dark."

Kitty's eyes were thoughtful.

"Was your sister safe?" she asked abruptly.

"Quite safe," he said. "There's been some excitement, but everything's all right now. And, Kitty, I can help you now. It seems I shall have tons of money for the future, so I'm going to play fairy god-mother—if I may. I shall come and see you to-morrow, or some day

soon, and we'll fix up some scheme. If I could stop now I'd tell you all about it; but I've other important things to do—among them two days' work at the office. . . ."

He pushed aside his half-emptied tea-cup, and left her. Alone, Kitty watched him with eyes dark and sober. Her mouth was a little wry with sorrow, and presently she shook her head with a look of utter misery—as of an unhappiness her heart would carry to the grave.

"He doesn't think—he doesn't think," she whispered. Then she turned drearily to her work.

In a few minutes Locritus was entering the office, and inside the outer door he met Mr. Frederick, cigarette in mouth. Frederick held out his hand.

"I say, Lockery," he said, "We were both fools, weren't we? I ought not to have been such a fool as to do an asinine thing of that kind, and I certainly ought never to have told you. As for young Bertie . . . the damnedest fool that ever was!" His voice was lowered. "Dilkes has hooked him!" he whispered.

"What!" Locritus cried.

"He's in the deadliest funk—doesn't know how it happened, but she's going to marry him. What the guv'nor will say—Lord only knows! What I say is, I'm a lucky dog. If it had been me the guv'nor would have kicked me out altogether. Of course, Bertie's got to get out of it somehow. I always said she was devilishly smart. Take my tip, Lockery, my boy, have nothing to do with the women. They'll nab you when you're not looking. Have a cigarette?"

Locritus went in and went straight to the manager,

to whom he explained such portions of his story as were due. Among the vital parts was the statement that he could not stay with the firm after the current month had completed its course. Albert he saw in his office, very dismal and gloomy at thought of his own folly, but for once delighted to see Locritus.

"I'm glad you're back," he said. "There are some things here that I can't muddle through at all."

He spoke with greater truth than he knew, for Locritus knew he would infallibly muddle anything he touched.

In a few minutes Locritus had his work under way. There was, as he had anticipated, an immense heap of it, letters and papers almost innumerable lying on his desk, all in confusion. Before getting it sorted into various piles he went along to the typists' office.

"It's all right," he said to Margaret, and returned to his work.

For the remainder of the afternoon he kept his eyes resolutely to the business of the letters before him, and heard only dreamily the "good-nights" of those on their way home. Margaret came along last of all, and stopped outside the door of his little office.

"I'm going," she said. "I'm very glad it's all right."

Locritus sprang up and opened the door.

"Don't go," he said, standing there. "I want to speak to you."

He gave her in a dozen sentences a rough sketch of what had happened.

"There's one more thing," added Locritus, with a

strange shyness and hesitation. "Is there—does there seem to you any insuperable objection—obstacle to your marrying me?"

Margaret blanched suddenly.

"Don't you see this is—in itself?" she said unsteadily.

"On the contrary, it's my main asset," Locritus began in an eager way. "I never dared ask before."

"Your main asset?" Margaret echoed.

"I know I'm a fool," he went on impetuously. "A boy whose whole capacity is nothing at all. I want you to make a man of me: it would take a long time—be awfully hard work. Won't you try?"

His tone became very pleading, and his eyes sought hers. Margaret looked honestly at him.

"Only yourself can make yourself a man," she said seriously. "It's unworthy of you to throw the responsibility onto me."

"I love you so!" Locritus said. "It's not a new thing, not something I've caught up in a minute. I've been in love with you for a year."

"You would do better without me," Margaret told him. "Far better to rely on yourself. Oh, it's out of the question—now!"

"But before——?" Locritus cried, catching at the word almost lost in her dropped voice. "Before, was it possible?"

"Would that be such a satisfaction to you?" Margaret asked, her lips tremulous, although she was trying to laugh at him.

"Of course not. Do you think I care what *was?* You think that because of this nonsense—perhaps it's not love?"

"No, no," she said. "I believe you. At least, I think I believe you."

"You may be quite sure," he went on warmly. "Oh, of course, you've seen. I couldn't keep it out of my voice, my eyes. You must have known there was nobody else—there could be nobody else. Is it the feeling that there's been a chasm made between our worlds?"

"We don't belong to the same class now," Margaret admitted slowly. "I'm not an aristocrat."

"What do you think we are? Do you think Fanny and I could ever be anything but lower middle class all our lives? You shan't plead that. You know I can't change: you are far more of an aristocrat than I am, you, with your own sweet dignity. . . . Is that only an excuse? Are you frightened of hurting me if you say you know me too well?"

His voice was quite strained, so eager and desperate was Locritus. Margaret looked directly at him for an instant.

"I don't want you to think me insincere," she said, "or just sidling from one thing to another, or only coquetting. If this hadn't happened—well, it makes me more scrupulous. You must realize that you have duties."

"We'll undertake them together," pleaded Locritus.

She shook her head.

"You mean my father? I told him that I intended speaking to you. He admires you—I'm speaking with

all the weight of his approval. But that wouldn't weigh with me at all. It's for you to decide."

"You must give me time to think," Margaret commenced.

"No, no! If you have that, I see you'll be cowardly. Girls always *are* cowardly in their second thoughts."

"I should be cowardly if I decided now—driven to it."

"To be successful I'd be a tyrant, in this case!" he said. "You know, you're not taking this thing seriously, Miss Marsden." Was it gathering confidence that dictated this change of tone? "Here is the life, the well-being of a fellow creature at your disposal. You have the power——"

"I said that was cowardly, before."

"And you persist in your mistaken policy of indifference? Oh, shame! shame! What would Jenny say?"

Margaret started and flushed.

"You know Jenny would like you to marry me."

"How do you know?" demanded Margaret.

"You told me so—just now, by your expression. Won't you?"

He came nearer to Margaret, who still stood there doubting. She was no longer frightened or confused, because she understood quite clearly that the note of entreaty in his voice was not the sentimental note she had dreaded of old. It was the voice, the fresh eager young voice of a man that spoke to her.

Margaret offered her hand in compromise. He refused to take it. She saw his own hand advanced and with-

drawn. The blood slowly mounted to her cheeks; she felt it burning in her ears and behind her eyes.

"You are tyrannic," she protested.

Locritus waited, although Margaret saw he was white with excitement.

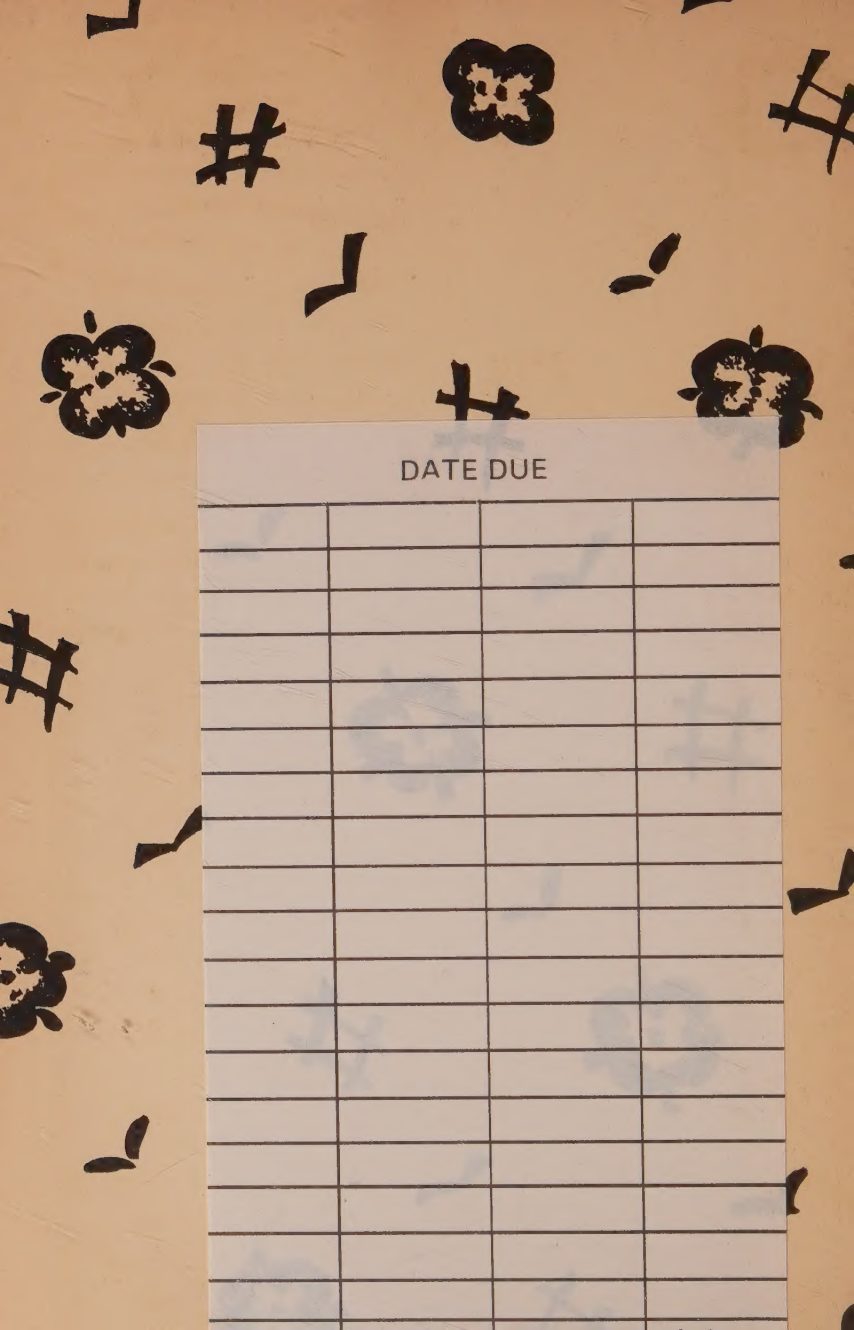
"It's the absurdest feeling," she said, between laughing and crying.

He kissed her on cheek and lips.

"I'm still afraid," Margaret told him.

"Afraid!" he cried exultantly, "afraid! Why, we'll be as happy as little grigs."

THE END



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Swinnerton, Frank

The merry heart.

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The merry heart
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